

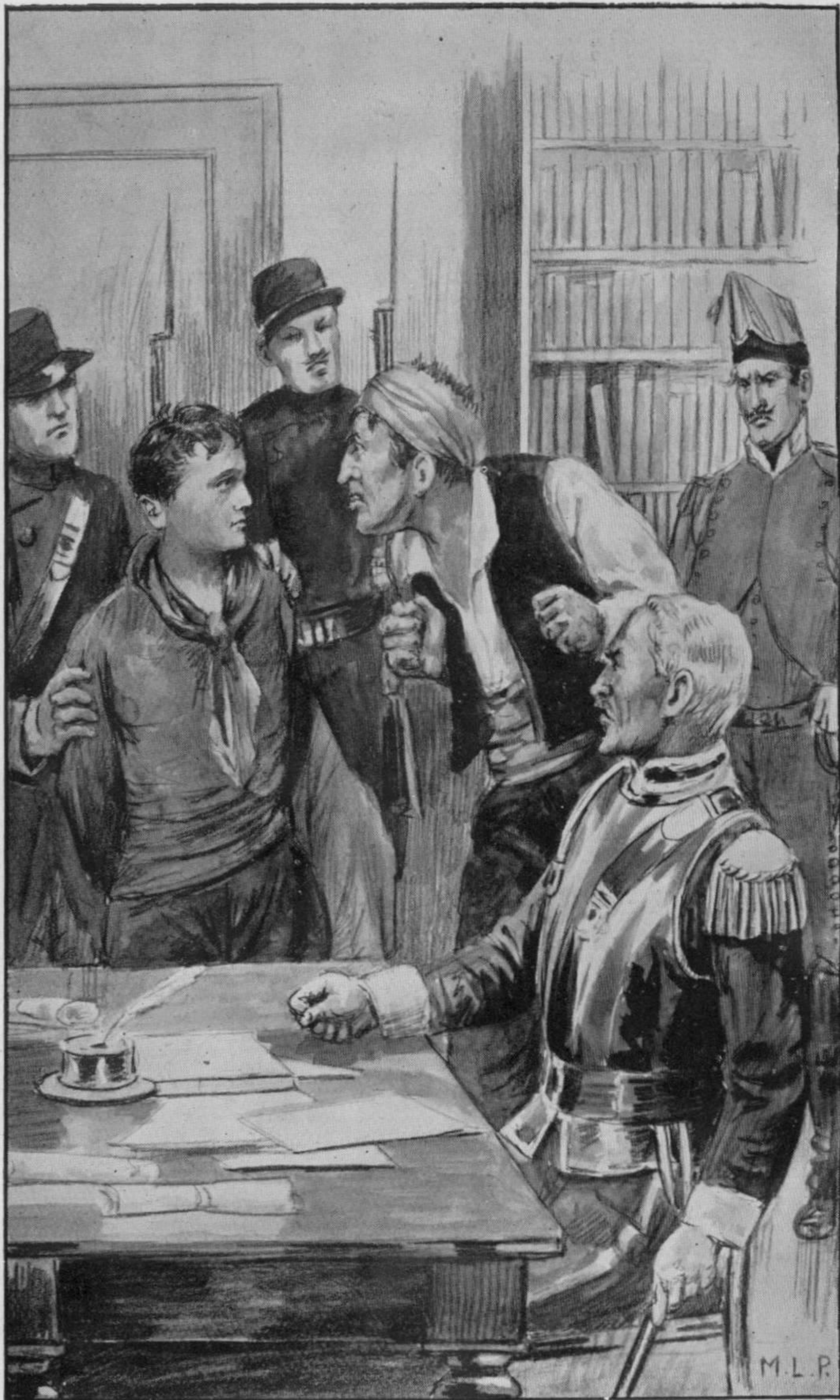
UNDER THE METEOR FLAG

*THE LOG OF A MIDSHIPMAN DURING THE
FRENCH REVOLUTIONARY WAR*

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HIS EYES GLARING INTO MINE LIKE THOSE OF A TIGER WHEN HE SCENTS
BLOOD.

UNDER THE METEOR FLAG.

CHAPTER I.

ON BOARD THE "SCOURGE."



N the 9th of March, 1793, his Britannic Majesty's gun-brig "Scourge" weighed, and stood out to sea from the anchorage at Spithead, under single-reefed topsails, her commander having received orders to cruise for a month in the chops of the Channel.

The "Scourge" was a 16-gun brig, but having been despatched to sea in a great hurry, after receiving somewhat extensive repairs at the dockyard, she had only eight long 6-pounders mounted, and, for the same reason, she was considerably short-handed, her crew amounting only to seventy men and boys, of whom quite one half were eminently "green" hands. War with France had just been once more declared, the various dockyards were busy night and day preparing and turning out ships for service, and the officers were glad to get hold of almost any class of men for their ships, provided only that they were strong and able-bodied.

In this dashing little brig, I—Ralph Chester—held the exalted and responsible post of midshipman; my appointment, on the morning in question, being exactly one week old. I had only joined the ship, however, three days before, and in the interval had been made the victim of almost every practical joke which the ingenuity of my fellow-mids could devise. It is not my purpose to recount these tricks, for stirring times were at hand, and adventures of a sterner and far more interesting nature were to meet me at the very outset of my career, crowding thick and fast upon each other's heels; and it is in the recital of these adventures that I hope to excite and gratify the curiosity of my readers. A few—and *only* a few—words are necessary by way of personal introduction.

My father—the Reverend Henry Chester—was rector of the

parish of —, which, as everybody knows, enjoys the advantage of being located in the heart of the loveliest scenery in Hampshire. Our family was not a large one ; there were only four of us—two boys and two girls—exclusive of my parents ; which was a decidedly fortunate circumstance, for if my father's family was moderate, his income was still more so, and my poor mother's ingenuity was often taxed to the utmost to make both ends meet, and at the same time maintain for us all such outward tokens of respectability as became the rector's family.

My elder brother, Henry, was destined to follow in the paternal footsteps by entering the church. My sisters Florence and Amy (my juniors respectively by two and four years) would, it was hoped, contract in due time suitable marriages, with the friendly aid and countenance of some of our more wealthy relations ; and, for myself, my dear father was most anxious that I should devote the few abilities with which I had been endowed by nature to the study of the law. Personally about the most unambitious man who ever lived, my father's ambition for his children was absolutely boundless ; and I believe, could the truth have been arrived at, he quite hoped in course of time to see his sons, the one Primate of England, and the other in possession of the woolsack.

But the prospect of spending my days in groping through musty law-books, hunting up obscure precedents, convincing an enlightened jury, through the medium of my persuasive arguments and impassioned eloquence, of the innocence of rascals carrying the word "rogue" legibly imprinted upon their countenances, and other operations of a kindred nature, had no attractions whatever for me ; my tastes and proclivities were all in favour of an active outdoor existence ; and, though I was prepared to yield obedience if my father chose to *insist* upon my following so uncongenial an occupation, I felt that it was only due to myself to point out to him that it would be utterly out of my power to infuse any spirit or enthusiasm into my pursuit of it.

My father, on learning how utterly distasteful to me were his plans for my future, at once waived his own inclinations, and came to the point by inviting me to state specifically *what* occupation I should prefer ; and, after taking a little time to give the question my most careful consideration, I informed him that I had made up my mind to go into the navy, if he saw no objection, and if I could get there. My decision gave great concern to both my parents, and indeed I may say to the whole family ; but as time went on and it became every day more apparent that I had set my heart upon going to sea, it was at length decided to yield to my wishes ;

and the only question which then remained was how to get me afloat under the most favourable auspices.

This question, fortunately for me, admitted of an easy solution. An uncle of my mother—Sir Peregrine Portfire, K.B., Vice-Admiral of the Red, &c., &c.—was applied to ; and within a fortnight I was directed to join the "Scourge" forthwith. A letter arrived by the same post from my great-uncle, containing an enclosure addressed to Commander George Brisac, soliciting his good service in my behalf, which enclosure I was instructed to present to the gentleman addressed on joining the ship.

I will not detain my readers by introducing them to the officers of the "Scourge;" my sojourn on board that ship was but a short one, so short, indeed, that I scarcely had time to become acquainted with them myself ; and, as I never fell in with any of them again in after-life, what little it is necessary for the reader to know concerning them he will glean in the progress of the narrative. And now to resume the thread of my story.

The "Scourge," when we left her, was standing out to sea under single-reefed topsails. The wind was about W.N.W., blowing strong, with frequent squalls of mingled rain and sleet. The sky was entirely obscured by dull, dirty, ragged-looking clouds, which hung so low that they seemed to touch our trucks as they swept rapidly along overhead. The sea under the shelter of the land was of course smooth, but as we drew rapidly off the shore (the brig proving to be a wonderfully fast little craft, to the intense satisfaction of all hands), we soon got into rougher water ; and then to the original miseries of rain and cold were added the discomfort of frequent and copious showers of icy spray, which, coming in over the weather bow, flew right aft and out over the lee quarter, treating everybody, with the utmost impartiality, to a good drenching on its way. All hands, from the skipper downward, disregarding appearances, carefully enwrapped their carcasses from head to foot in oilskin ; and if anything had been needed to complete the all-pervading aspect of cold and wretchedness which the scene presented, it would have been found in contemplation of the wet and shiny appearance of the crew, each with a little stream of water trickling off the flap of his sou'-wester down his back, and with hair and whiskers blowing drenched and bedraggled about his pinched and purple visage.

The crowning misery of all—sea-sickness—I was happily spared, and I was thus enabled to go about my duty without experiencing a wish that some kindly sea would wash me overboard and end my life and my wretchedness together ; but, as it was, the circum-

stances attendant upon my first experience of active service were such as might well have damped the ardour of one even more enthusiastic than myself. My pride, or my obstinacy, however, were such, that having once put my hand to the plough, I was quite determined that nothing short of actual physical incapacity should compel me to turn back.

We stretched off the land, close-hauled upon the starboard tack, the whole of that day, and the greater part of the succeeding night; the skipper's object being, as I gathered from a remark or two which I overheard between him and the first lieutenant, to get well over toward the French coast; where, if fortune favoured us, we might be lucky enough to pick up a prize or two.

As the day wore on, the wind increased considerably in strength, and at the end of the first dog-watch orders were given to take down another reef in the topsails, and to stow the courses. The topsail yards were accordingly lowered down upon the caps, and the crew proceeded aloft to execute this duty, some of the green hands evincing a very marked disinclination to go more than half-way up the lower rigging; and when at length, by dint of mingled force and persuasion, they were got as high as the tops, two or three refused point-blank to lay out upon the yards. The first lieutenant raved at them, stamped furiously upon the deck, and threatened unutterable things if they did not lay out forthwith; and the captains of the tops, not to be behindhand, proceeded vigorously to "freshen their way" with a rope's end. This latter persuasive appeared to have the desired effect; and, slowly and with excessive caution, the men proceeded to lay out. Suddenly the foot of one of them on the mainyard slipped; he clung convulsively for a moment to the yard, and then whirled off backwards, striking the main rigging on the weather side, and rebounding into the sea.

Instantly there arose the startling cry of "A man overboard!" I know not what possessed me, but in the excitement of the moment, and without in the least thinking of what I was doing, I no sooner saw the man strike the water than I rushed aft, leaped upon the taffrail, and, pausing a single instant to mark the spot where he fell, raised my hands above my head, and took a most scientific header into the boiling surge. As I was descending toward the water I heard a hearty cheer from the men, and then the icy cold waves closed over my head; there was a rushing sound in my ears, and darkness all around me.

When I rose to the surface, I found myself close to the drowning man, who was struggling feebly and in an aimless sort of way,

apparently half stunned, and lying face downwards in the water. Swimming happened to be one of the very few accomplishments in which I excelled, otherwise I do not think it at all probable I should have leapt overboard so unhesitatingly; be that as it may, though I had never been in rough water before, and though, now that I was overboard, the sea seemed incomparably more tempestuous than it had appeared to be from the ship's deck, I felt perfectly at home. Paddling cautiously up to the man, I seized him by the hair, and turned him over on his back, then threw myself upon my back, and dragged his head up high enough upon my breast to lift his mouth out of water, supporting him and myself by vigorous strokes with my feet. Looking round, as we rose on the crest of a sea, I could dimly descry the brig through the rapidly increasing gloom; and to my horror she appeared to be a long distance away. I had time only, however, for a momentary glance, when we sank into the trough, and I lost sight of her. A few seconds afterwards I caught sight of her again, and this time she was displaying in her rigging a lantern, the sight of which I regarded (rightly, as it afterwards turned out) as a sign and token that every effort would be used to recover us, and truly the feeble gleam, appearing and disappearing as we rose and fell upon the agitated surface of the sea, was to me a very star of hope and encouragement.

My vigorous efforts to keep myself and the man afloat soon told upon me, and I began to fear that I should be obliged to abandon my prize in order to preserve my own life; luckily for us both, however, my companion had ceased to struggle, and now lay supported within my arms, to all appearance dead. As the time dragged heavily away, I grew more and more exhausted, and at length the man slipped from my relaxing grasp and began to sink. Happily at this instant I caught a momentary glimpse of a small object standing out black and distinct against the narrow belt of light lying along the western horizon, and I felt instinctively that it was a boat coming in search of us; the sight imparted new energy to my nerveless frame, and, recovering my grasp upon the man just as he was sinking beyond my reach, I determined to keep him above water until succour arrived, or go down with him.

How anxiously I kept watch upon the boat, and the desperate efforts I made to keep afloat, it would be impossible to describe. The dancing craft appeared to be lying at anchor upon the water, though in reality she was foaming down towards us before the wind and sea, propelled by the strong arms of eight of the stoutest oarsmen in the ship. At length, however, she was near enough to enable me to discern the bow man standing up, one hand shading

his eyes, and the other grasping a boat-hook. Presently a hail came down upon the wind toward us from the boat, and directly afterwards another. I was by this time too weak to reply; and could only hope that they would pull on until close enough to see us; to my inexpressible horror, however, when some seven or eight lengths away, the boat's head swerved sharply aside, and the craft darted off upon a course at right angles to her former one. Then indeed I uttered a shriek loud enough to awake the seven sleepers, and immediately went under. I thought it was now all over with us both; but the love of life is strong, especially in the young, and a convulsive struggle brought us once more to the surface; but, blinded with salt water, and with my senses fast leaving me, I no longer looked round for the boat, but battled desperately, though more than half unconsciously, for life; still retaining, with the tenacious grasp of the drowning, my hold upon my companion. I at length heard faintly, and as though in a dream, a voice saying, "There they are! port, sir, hard!" and then all became an utter blank.

The first indication of returning consciousness was the sound of the surgeon's voice saying, "All right! he is coming to; and we shall save him yet."

"Thank God for that!" presently exclaimed another voice, which I recognized as the skipper's; "I would not have lost the lad for the worth of all that I possess. I never saw a more plucky thing in all my life; and, if he lives, he will grow up to be an ornament to the service."

At this point I opened my eyes, and found those of the speaker bent upon me with an expression of deep solicitude. I furthermore found that I had been stripped of my wet clothing, and was lying in the captain's own cot, with the doctor and one of the seamen rubbing my limbs and body so vigorously with their bare hands, in the endeavour to restore a brisk circulation, that I seemed to be in imminent danger of being flayed alive.

"How do you feel now, my boy?" inquired the skipper, as he bent over the side of the cot, and laid his hand kindly upon my own.

"Very much better, sir, thank you," I replied; though, to tell the truth, I was at that moment enduring the most acute pain in every nerve of my body—the physical suffering attendant upon the returning tide of life being actually much greater than that experienced while I was undergoing the process of drowning.

"That's right," returned he, in a cheery tone of voice; "I am glad to hear it, as every man in the ship will be. You have performed a right gallant action, and I am sure you will be glad to

know that your efforts have not been in vain. The poor fellow whom you rescued is alive, and likely to do well."

I felt too weak to make any reply to this gratifying speech, a fact which the doctor instantly perceived, for he turned to the skipper and remarked, "With your permission, sir, we will now leave the lad in quiet to sleep off his exhaustion. I will just mix him a simple restorative, while your steward tucks him in and makes him comfortable for the night; after which I think we may safely leave the rest to nature, though, of course, I shall look in upon both of my patients from time to time, so as to make quite sure that they are going on all right."

If the worthy medico fulfilled his promise to "look in" upon me during the night—and I feel quite sure he did—I was blissfully unconscious of the fact, for under the soothing influence of the restorative draught, and the warmth of the blankets liberally heaped upon me by the captain's steward, I speedily sank into a deep, dreamless, refreshing slumber—a delicious oblivion—from which I awoke in the morning to find myself very little the worse for my exertions of the previous night.

When I opened my eyes I saw, through the open door of the state-room, that the sun was streaming brightly down through the skylight, lighting up the cosy little cabin, bringing out to the fullest advantage the glowing tints of three or four well-executed pictures, which were secured to the bulkheads, and altogether imparting a delightfully cheerful appearance to the apartment. The vessel, however, was in violent motion; I could, from my position in the cot, look out through the stern windows; and I saw that there was a heavy sea running, and the roar of the wind through the rigging, which was distinctly audible above the sound of creaking timbers, rattling doors, trampling feet, and the *swish* of heavy showers of spray upon the deck, told me it was blowing hard. I felt so greatly recovered, however, that I resolved to get up, and, springing out of the cot, I proceeded to dress myself with as much alacrity as the rolling and pitching of the ship would permit. While engaged in this occupation, the doctor entered the cabin.

"Hillo!" he exclaimed, "turning out, eh? Well done, young gentleman. Steady! you have not shipped your sea-legs yet, as our friend the first lieutenant would say; you must be cautious, or you will be thrown against something or other, and get a nasty knock. Well, and how do you feel this morning?"

"A trifle weak," I replied, "that's all. I dare say I shall be better when I have had breakfast."

"That's your sort," responded the jolly old medico; "if you are

hungry, there is not much wrong with you ; but you mentioned breakfast. Have you any notion what time it may happen to be ?”

“ Not much,” I replied ; “ but I fear it is rather late.”

“ That depends upon what you call late,” he retorted. “ Some of your town-bred dandies are only in their first nap about this time. As a matter of absolute fact, however, it has just gone eight bells, or noon ; so that you see, my young friend, breakfast is over long enough ago. But I dare say Patterson can find something for you all the same.” He rang a small handbell which stood on the table, and the captain’s steward made his appearance. “ Patterson,” said the doctor, “ this young gentleman complains that he is hungry. Have you any trifle, such as the wing of a chicken, or something of that sort, in your pantry that you could give him ?”

“ No, sir,” replied the man, with a grin, “ I’m afraid I’ve not. But if a nice rasher of bacon and a cup of coffee will do—”

“ Splendidly,” I interrupted. “ To tell you the truth, doctor, I am hungry enough to eat a horse, harness and all ; so I shall be very glad to have either a rasher of bacon or anything else that is quickly obtainable.”

Patterson was not long in getting ready the promised repast, which I cleared to the last morsel ; after which I made my way on deck. The skipper was there, promenading the weather side of the quarter-deck, the first luff jogging fore and aft alongside of him. I was called up, a few kind inquiries made, together with a eulogistic remark or two upon my conduct of the previous evening ; and the whole neatly finished off with an intimation that, having begun so well, great things would be expected of me in future, and that, having established a reputation for zeal and gallantry, it was hoped I would do my utmost to maintain it ; after which I was dismissed. I soon found that my exploit had placed me upon quite a different footing in the ship from that which I had occupied before. The men treated me with real respect, instead of the good-humoured burlesque thereof which they had accorded me hitherto ; and my fellow-mids at once received me into the berth upon a footing of perfect equality with themselves, each one striving to do me some little kindness or show me some little attention, in place of playing off disagreeable practical jokes upon me. They would not have been midshipmen had they not had a jocular remark or two to make upon the subject, but it was all said in good part. The wind continued to blow hard during the whole of that day, but toward sunset it moderated somewhat, and veered a point or two to the northward. The ship had been under close-reefed top-sails and fore-topmast staysail ever since midnight of the night before.

CHAPTER II.

HOW WE LOST HER.

THE sun was just sinking below the horizon, his parting beams lighting up gorgeously a heavy bank of clouds which hung low down in the western quarter, when the look-out man aloft hailed, "A sail on the weather bow!"

Everybody was instantly on the alert.

"What do you make her out to be?" hailed Mr. Sennitt, the first lieutenant; while the skipper turned to me and said,—

"Mr. Chester, be good enough to slip down into my cabin, and bring up my telescope, if you please."

As I made a dive down the companion, I heard the look-out hail again: "She is a large lugger, sir; I can make her out quite plainly; she is just in the wake of the sun."

"All hands make sail," was the next order, given as quick as lightning.

I got the glass, and hurrying on deck with it, placed it in the skipper's hands. The men were by this time lying out on the yards, shaking a couple of reefs out of the topsails, and loosing the courses. Captain Brisac slung the telescope over his shoulder, and, springing into the rigging, made his way aloft to the cross-trees, where the look-out still sat, with one hand grasping the top-gallant shrouds, and the other shading his eyes. The skipper braced himself firmly against the topmost head, raised the telescope to his eye, and took a good long look at the stranger, closed the glass sharply, and descended to the deck again with all the agility of a monkey—or a midshipman.

"She *is* a lugger, sure enough; and a large one too," he remarked, as he rejoined the first lieutenant. "There can be no doubt that she is French; and I have a strong suspicion that she is a privateer on the look-out for some of our homeward-bound vessels. I do not think they have made us out yet; when I saw her she was jogging easily along under her fore and mizzen lugs

and a small jib. If she does not see us within the next five minutes, the chances are that she will not make us out at all until the moon rises, which will not be for quite another hour; by which time I hope we shall have drawn pretty close up to her."

The look-out was hailed from time to time, to inquire whether the lugger had made any more sail or not; and each time the cheering reply was, "Not yet, sir." At length the reply was, "It is too dark to see her now, sir; but she had not when I lost sight of her."

The brig was now tearing along under single-reefed topsails, courses, fore-topmast staysail, jib, and spanker, her lee side buried deep in the foaming brine, and the sea coming bodily in over her bows by tons at a time. She no longer rose lightly over the opposing waves, but dashed headlong into them; rushing forward upon her way like a startled courser.

Every night-glass in the ship was brought into requisition by the eager officers, in their endeavours to catch an occasional glimpse of the stranger; but the night had settled down pitchy dark, the sky having rapidly become obscured by a thick veil of clouds immediately after the disappearance of the sun below the horizon, so that not so much as a solitary star was visible; all efforts to get a sight of the chase were consequently quite in vain. So dark was it that, standing by the taffrail, it was impossible to see as far as the bows of the ship. Not a light of any description was permitted on board the "Scourge;" even the binnacle lights were carefully masked, and Captain Brisac soon began to manifest a great deal of anxiety at the risk which he was undoubtedly incurring in thus driving his ship at racing speed through the thick darkness, without a warning light of any description to indicate her presence to other craft. He contented himself, however, with placing five of the sharpest-sighted men on the look-out; namely, one on the flying jibboom end, one on each cat-head, and one on each of the fore yard-arms.

The bearings of the chase had of course been very accurately taken the last thing before losing sight of her, when she was estimated to be ten miles distant, and about two points on the weather bow, going along upon an easy bowline.

The "Scourge" was an exceedingly smart little brig under her canvas; and when the additional sail had been set and every brace, sheet, tack, and bowline trimmed with the utmost nicety, it was the general opinion that she was going a good honest eleven knots. The chase was thought to be travelling at the rate of four

knots at most ; it was hoped, therefore, that when the moon rose we should find ourselves within three or four miles of her.

The suspense, which we were compelled to endure as best we might, caused the time to drag heavily on ; at length, however, a brightening of the sky in the eastern quarter proclaimed the welcome approach of the moon. Slowly—very slowly—the brightness increased, the veil of cloud breaking up before it, and revealing the sky beyond, all luminous with silvery radiance. A few more anxious minutes, and the round white disc of the moon rose slowly upwards into view, flinging a broad path of light across the tumbling billows, and gleaming pale and ghostly on the sails of the lugger, which now appeared directly ahead of us, and about five miles distant.

Instantly every glass in the ship was levelled at the chase ; and a general exclamation of annoyance arose, as, while still engaged in taking their first long look at her, the pursuers observed a sudden fluttering of canvas about the mainmast which speedily resolved itself unmistakably into a lofty well-set mainsail.

“Ah !” ejaculated the skipper, stamping his foot impatiently on the deck, “they evidently have sharp eyes on board yonder lugger ; they must have seen us the moment that the moon rose.”

“Yes,” returned the first lieutenant, with his eye still glued to his glass ; “and the sharp eyes appear to belong to an equally sharp crew ; they are shaking out their reefs fore and aft and shifting their jib, all at the same time. Depend upon it, sir, we shall have to work for that craft before we get her.”

“We shall catch her, Mr. Sennitt, never fear,” was the cheery response ; “she cannot be above half our size, and will have no chance with us in such a breeze as this. And I do not anticipate that she is any more heavily armed than we are, though she may possibly carry a few more men. Her skipper will of course escape if he can ! and when he finds that impossible, he will, equally of course, fight, and very likely fight well. Still, I do not think we shall have much difficulty in taking him.

“In the meantime, however,” remarked Sennitt, who had his glass constantly at his eye, “unless I am greatly mistaken, he is gradually creeping away from us ; his rigging does not show out as plainly as it did ten minutes ago, yet there is more light.”

Another long and anxious observation of the chase by both officers followed ; and, imitating their example, I also brought my glass to bear upon the flying craft. Flying she literally seemed to be rather than sailing. At one moment her hull was completely hidden by an intervening wave-crest, her sails only being visible ;

the next she would rush into view, her low hull deluged with spray which glanced in the moonlight like a shower of diamonds as it flew over her almost to the height of her low mast-heads and dissipated itself in the sea to leeward ; while her masts bent like willow wands, inclining at what seemed to me a fearfully perilous angle with the horizon.

"Upon my word, Sennitt, I fear you are right," at last said the skipper, bringing his glass reluctantly down into the hollow of his arm. "Let us lay our glasses aside for half an hour, we shall then be better able to judge which ship is gaining upon the other, and if we find that we are losing ground, there will be nothing for it but to shake the remaining reef out of our topsails, and get the flying-jib on her ; our spars are good, and the rigging new ; both ought to be quite capable of standing a little extra strain."

"It will be rather a risky business to increase the strain already laid upon the spars," said the first lieutenant, glancing anxiously aloft at the topmasts, which were springing and buckling at every plunge of the ship, with the enormous pressure of the tightly distended topsails ; "still it is perhaps worth trying ; it would be a fine feather in our caps if we could send into port the first prize of the war."

The stipulated half-hour passed away ; and at the end of that period the unwelcome conviction forced itself upon every one that the lugger was having the best of it.

"There is no help for it, Mr. Sennitt," said the skipper, "shake that reef out of the topsails, and set the flying-jib ; she *must* bear it."

Excited by the exhilarating influence of the chase, the hands sprang aloft with the utmost alacrity, and in an incredibly short space of time had the reef out and the topsails distended to their fullest extent ; the flying-jib flapped wildly in the wind for a moment or two, and then yielded to the restraint of the sheet, at which it tugged as though it would tear away the cleat to which it was secured.

The effect of these additions to the before heavy pressure of canvas upon the ship was immediate, and, to my inexperience, highly alarming. The brig now lay over upon her side to such an extent that it was with the utmost difficulty I could retain my footing upon the steeply inclined and slippery plane of the deck. The lee sail was completely buried in the sea, which boiled in over the lee bow and surged aft along the deck like a mill-race ; while ever and anon an ominous *crack* aloft told of the severity of the strain upon the overtaxed spars.

Mr. Sennitt kept glancing uneasily upward, as these portentous sounds smote upon his ear ; which Captain Brisac observing, he turned to the first lieutenant and said,—

“Do not be alarmed, Sennitt ; it is only the spars settling into their berths ; they—”

Crash ! I sprang instinctively aft to the taffrail, out of the way of the wreck, and then looked up to see both topmasts, snapped off like carrots just above the caps, go swooping over to leeward, to hang by their rigging under the lee of the courses ; while the ship, with a sharp shock, as though she had touched upon some unseen rock, recovered herself and floated once more upon an almost even keel.

Captain Brisac was much too gentlemanly to swear. He simply turned to the first lieutenant and said, “We have rather overdone it this time, Sennitt ; however, it is no use crying over spilt milk, so turn the hands up, please, and let them clear away the wreck, and repair damages as soon as possible.”

The boom of a distant gun told us that the crew of the lugger had not been unobservant of our misfortune, and that they were willing to expend a charge of powder in acquainting us with their exultation thereat.

By daybreak next morning we had everything at aunt again ; the chase, however, had run completely out of sight, hours before, and was, at all events for the present, hopelessly lost to us.

The wind had gone down very considerably during the night, and had hauled round to about due north ; the sea went rapidly down ; the sky was cloudless and intensely blue ; the air became keen and frosty ; and when the sun rose, it found us standing to the westward under top-gallant-sails, without a single sail of any kind in sight.

CHAPTER III.

THE "SANS-CULOTTE."

THE adage that "it is an ill wind that blows nobody good" maintained its reputation for truth, even in the case of the seemingly unmitigated disaster of the previous night—that is to say, at least, as far as I was concerned ; inasmuch as the knowledge and experience which I acquired of my profession during the operation of clearing away the wreck, recovering the sails, rigging, and undamaged spars, fitting the new topmasts into their places, and restoring the ship generally to her former condition, gave me an advantage which I could scarcely have hoped to secure in less than six months of the ordinary run of active service. I watched with unflagging interest the progress of every operation as the work went forward, with the result that I learned by actual observation, coupled with the best use of my reasoning faculties, and frequent questions to Mr. Sennitt (who, I may say, heard and answered my inquiries with quite astonishing patience), the position and use of every rope that I saw fitted, the mode of working the yards, and much other valuable knowledge.

It is surprising how speedily human curiosity becomes quickened and aroused, if the individual devotes himself earnestly to the study of an art or science. The thirst for knowledge increases with its acquisition—at least, such is my experience—and is not to be satisfied until every mystery connected with such art or science has been mastered, and made the inalienable property of the student. It was so with me in relation to everything connected with my profession. Having gained a certain amount of knowledge concerning the mysteries of seamanship, I craved for more ; and throwing all my energies into the discharge of my daily round of duties, made such rapid progress as astonished everybody, myself included.

The "Scourge," meanwhile, was slowly pursuing her course down channel ; the wind, after the recent blow, having fallen light and baffling ; it was not, therefore, until the morning of the 13th

that she reached her cruising-ground, Scilly bearing at the time about N.E., distant 26 miles.

The day broke clear and cloudless, with a light air of wind from the southward ; the water being smooth, save for the long, rolling swell of the Atlantic, which at the spot in question made itself very distinctly felt. The air was mild and springlike, the unclouded sunbeams struck with a perceptible sensation of warmth, and every one on board, forgetting the recent misery of cold and wet, greeted the welcome change with a corresponding flow of exuberant animal spirits.

The hands had just been piped to breakfast, when the look-out aloft reported, "A sail right ahead !"

Recalling to mind the skipper's request on a previous occasion, I at once ran down into the cabin for his telescope, which I brought on deck and handed to him.

"Thank you, Mr. Chester," said he. "I have remarked with very great pleasure your zeal in the discharge of your duties. Go on as you have begun, my boy, and you will soon become a valuable and efficient officer."

Captain Brisac did not, however, himself go aloft this time ; Mr. Clewline, the second lieutenant, happened to be on deck at the moment, and the skipper handed him the glass, with a polite request that he would "see what he could make of her."

Mr. Clewline, I thought, seemed rather to resent the suggestion as an affront to his dignity ; he, however, made no demur, but proceeded aloft with great deliberation, and, seating himself upon the fore-topsail yard, took a very leisurely observation of the stranger.

Having devoted about a quarter of an hour to this occupation, he slowly closed the telescope, and carefully slinging it over his shoulder, descended to the deck with the same deliberation which had characterized his ascent. It was not until he had regained the skipper's side that he condescended to make his report ; when, handing back the glass with a stiff bow, he said, "I make out the stranger to be, sir, a brig, apparently French, of about our own size ; she is standing directly toward us, upon the starboard tack, under top-gallant-sails."

"Thank you, sir," returned the skipper shortly ; then turning upon his heel he went below to his cabin, Patterson having come on deck a minute or two before, to announce that breakfast was ready.

The news quickly spread through the ship that the sail in sight was supposed to be a Frenchman ; and as the two vessels were approaching each other, and an action, in the event of Mr. Clewline's

supposition proving correct, inevitable, a considerable amount of excitement prevailed. The men bolted their breakfast in less than half the time usually devoted to that meal, and returned to the deck the moment they had disposed of their last morsel ; while the officers betrayed at least an equal amount of eagerness, two or three of them hastily swallowing a cup of scalding coffee, and munching up a biscuit, without giving themselves time even to sit down.

" Old Sennitt "—as he was irreverently termed in the midshipmen's berth—was one of the earliest to put in an appearance after breakfast, and his first act was to go straight aloft with his glass. He devoted more time even than Mr. Clewline to the examination of the stranger, and it was not until Captain Brisac had returned to the deck and hailed him that he made a move.

As he came aft and joined his superior upon the quarter-deck, exultation was visible in his face, and in every movement of his body.

" It is all right, sir," he exclaimed ; " she is French beyond all possibility of doubt. The cut of her canvas is alone sufficient evidence of her nationality ; but in order that there may be no room for question of it, she has furled her royals, and has run up the tricolour to her main-royalmast-head. She is a brig, as far as I can make out her rig, coming end-on to us as she is, and seems about our size, or perhaps a trifle larger. I suppose we may as well clear for action at once ? "

" If you please, Mr. Sennitt ; and, not to be behindhand with them, let them see the colour of our bunting before you do anything else."

The order to clear for action was received with enthusiasm ; and the little round ball which immediately soared aloft, breaking abroad and displaying the naval ensign as it touched the main truck, was greeted with a rousing cheer. The " green " hands were by this time not quite so verdant as they had been a few days before, Mr. Sennitt having drilled them most remorselessly at every available opportunity—and as they had been very judiciously intermingled with the experienced " salts," in appointing them to their various stations, the work went on with, as Captain Brisac remarked, " very creditable celerity." In little more than half an hour, the yards had been slung, bulk-heads knocked down, the magazine opened, guns cast loose, loaded, and run out, and every other preparation completed.

Meanwhile the two brigs had been slowly drawing together, and by 10 a.m. were within a couple of miles of each other. There had

been a little manœuvring on each side to secure the weather-gage ; but our skipper, perceiving that the action was likely to be thereby delayed, speedily yielded the point, and allowed the Frenchman to take the coveted position.

"It will make very little difference, five minutes after we are engaged," he remarked to the first lieutenant, who, after having gone the rounds and personally seen that everything was ready, had rejoined him aft, just as the order had been given to the helmsman of the "Scourge" to "keep away." "There is one thing which we have not yet done," he continued, "it seems quite unnecessary, but we may as well avoid all possibility of mistake by showing the private signal."

The private signal was accordingly shown, but evoked, as was expected, no response. It was consequently hauled down again, and now everybody made himself finally ready for the impending conflict.

My readers will naturally feel curious to know whether on this, the first occasion of my "smelling gunpowder," I experienced any sensation of fear. I am old enough now, and have seen enough of service, to have no misapprehension of being misunderstood, or rather misjudged ; I will therefore confess the truth, and candidly acknowledge that, for a few minutes after the completion of our preparations, I felt most horribly frightened. I knew that I was about to be involved in a scene of death and destruction, of sickening slaughter, and of even more sickening physical suffering ; I anticipated seeing my fellow-men struck down right and left, their limbs torn away, and, quite possibly, their bodies cut in two by the cruel chain-shot ; I looked round upon the order and cleanliness which everywhere prevailed on board our ship, and contrasted the existent condition of things with the picture which my imagination conjured up of impending blood and carnage ; and I admit that for a few minutes my heart almost failed me. That state of feeling, however, soon passed away, and was succeeded by a condition of painful excitement and impatience, which lasted until the first shot was fired, when it abruptly subsided, leaving me as cool and collected as I am at the present moment.

I was not too frightened, however, to notice and admire the perfect *sang-froid* with which Captain Brisac and Mr. Sennitt contemplated the approach of our antagonist. They stood side by side, just abaft the main-rigging, scrutinizing every movement on board the French ship, and exchanging critical remarks upon the smartness of her crew in shortening sail and executing the various manœuvres usual on board a ship going into action ; and I

gathered, with no very comfortable feelings, that, from what they observed, they quite anticipated a hard fight.

When the ships had approached each other within a quarter of a mile, we were able, for the first time, to ascertain the actual armament of our foe. Mr. Sennitt was the first to seize the opportunity of counting her ports, and he it was who announced, loud enough for everybody to hear, that she showed six guns of a side, making her entire battery heavier than our own by four guns. "Which makes her a very fair match for us," he contentedly remarked.

"We will engage her at close quarters, Mr. Sennitt," said the skipper; "be good enough, therefore, to have every gun double shotted. Let no man fire until I give the word; we will wait until we are fairly abreast of her, and then give her our whole larboard broadside at once. Luff, you may!" to the master, who had taken the wheel. "Luff, and shave her as closely as you can, without actually touching her. Steady—so; that will do very nicely."

As the French ship came up, she fired every gun along her larboard broadside, commencing from forward, the moment they could be brought to bear; and the shot came tearing in through our bulwarks, making the splinters fly in all directions. In my ignorance I expected to see about half our crew go down before that first discharge, but to my unbounded surprise not a man was hurt.

The Frenchman was by this time so close that we could not only see with the utmost distinctness the crew reloading their guns, but could hear the confused jabber of excited conversation which appeared to be going on unchecked on board. What a contrast to our own ship, where every man stood at his post, steady and silent as a statue!

At last the two ships came up fairly abreast of each other, and were passing so closely that an active man might have jumped from the one to the other, when the skipper uttered the word "Fire!"

The four guns of our larboard broadside rang out simultaneously, the concussion of the air causing the two ships to heel outwards; and through the noise of the explosion I distinctly heard the crashing of timbers, and the piercing shrieks of the wounded.

"That's one to us; we draw first blood," chuckled a voice behind me; and I looked round to observe young Harvey, a fellow-mid, rubbing his hands with an air of great satisfaction.

"Hard up with your helm," exclaimed the skipper; "shiver your main-topsail and let her wear short round; stand by your guns

there on the starboard broadside, and fire as you bring each to bear."

The effect of this manœuvre was to lay our ship almost directly athwart the stern of the Frenchman, and so smartly was it executed that we had pretty effectually raked him before he was able to bear up, and give us another broadside, the whole of which flew over us harmlessly, except for a hole or two in our sails.

The fight now became a running one, both ships going off before the wind, and the Frenchman rather evincing a disposition to keep us at a distance. He did not seem to like the taste he'd had of our quality, as I heard the Irish captain of the after-gun, on the port side, remark. But we possessed rather the advantage of him in the matter of speed, and slowly edged down upon him until we were once more close alongside, when the ships exchanged broadsides, both firing at the same moment. We could see the white marks in our antagonist's sides, where our shot had struck, but either from defective aim, or because he wanted to shoot away our spars, all his shot again flew high, with no worse result than the severing of the starboard main-topsail-brace, a casualty which it took but a minute or two to repair.

Two or three more broadsides were exchanged without visible effect, and then an unlucky shot wounded our fore-topmast so badly that, after tottering for a minute or two, it went over the bows, dragging the main-top-gallant-mast down with it.

Captain Brisac proved himself quite equal to the occasion. He could not prevent the "Scourge" from broaching-to, so, ordering the helm to be put hard-a-port, he luffed us right athwart the Frenchman's stern, pouring in the larboard broadside, which had been disengaged since our opening fire, with such good effect that the French ship's main-yard was shot away, and the mainmast-head badly wounded.

A strong gang was immediately set to work board on each ship to repair damages; but as the Frenchman, by reason of the loss of his after-sail, was unable to bring his ship upon a wind, he had no alternative but to run dead before it, fully exposed, meanwhile, to the raking effects of our larboard guns, which were kept playing upon him until he had passed out of range, not one of his guns during that time being able to reply.

It took us rather over one hour to clear away the wreck, and get another topmast on end, fully rig it, and make sail once more. Mr. Sennitt, who personally superintended the work, insisted that it should be thoroughly well done—as well done in fact as though we had not been in the presence of an enemy. The French

had, in the meantime, been quite as active as ourselves, and if their work was not so neatly done as our own, still it *was* done after a fashion, and they were ready to make sail a few minutes before us, an advantage of which they availed themselves with such lacrity that it became evident their chief anxiety was to place, in the shortest possible time, the greatest possible distance between us and themselves.

This project, however, by no means met the views of us "Scourges," and the instant that it was possible, every available stitch of canvas was packed upon our ship, with the view of closing with the enemy again as promptly as possible.

Then began that most wearisome of all wearisome businesses, a stern chase in a light breeze, during which the whole crew, from the skipper downwards, whistled most devoutly for a wind.

Slowly—*very* slowly we gained upon the chase, the master, who had resigned the wheel at the cessation of the action, standing upon the fore-castle with his sextant, measuring, about once every five minutes, the angle between the mast-head and the water-line of the chase, to ascertain which ship gained upon the other. At last "I think we are within range now, sir; shall we try a shot from our bow-chasers?" said Mr. Sennitt.

"We can scarcely reach him yet, I am afraid," said the skipper; "but there will be no harm in trying."

The order was given, and old Tompion, the gunner, undertook in person the task of levelling the gun. He went about the work with much deliberation and a great display of science, and at length, watching a favourable opportunity, fired. In another moment a white sear started into view near the Frenchman's rudder and close to the water's edge.

"Hulled him! by all that's clever," exclaimed the first luff, while the gratified Tompion looked slowly round upon his mess-mates, with modest pride beaming from every feature.

"Returned, with thanks," murmured young Harvey, who was stationed close beside me, as a puff of smoke veiled for an instant the stern of our antagonist; and then the shot was seen bounding toward us, its path marked by the jets of water which flew up wherever the ball struck. At last it was seen to scurry along the surface for a short distance, finally disappearing within about fifty fathoms of our bows.

"Try another shot there, forward," said the skipper, "and aim for his spars. A guinea to the first man who knocks away a spar big or little."

Every man in the ship was of course anxious to try his hand,

and Mr. Sennitt was obliged to interfere, with the view of allowing the best shots to have the first chance.

Some curiously indifferent shooting now ensued, the very eagerness of the men seeming to render them unsteady. I had strolled forward to watch the game, and, after several most exasperating misses, exclaimed, "I should like very much to try; I believe I could do better than that."

"Then try you shall, youngster," said Mr. Sennitt; "the first shot a man ever fires is often a very lucky one, and perhaps yours may be so. You shall fire the next shot."

While the gun was being loaded, Tompion availed himself of the opportunity to deliver a short lesson on gunnery, for my especial benefit, of which all that I remember was that he attached great importance to the "trajectory," and was eloquent on the subject of the "parabolic curve."

I had watched with much impatience the very scrupulous nicety with which most of the men pretended to lay the gun, and I was strongly impressed with the conviction that over-carefulness had much to do with their repeated failures; I took very little trouble, therefore, beyond seeing that the muzzle of the gun had a good elevation, after which I simply waited, squinting along the sights, until I saw that the weapon was just about to come in line with the Frenchman's masts, when I pulled the trigger-line smartly, and was dragged forcibly backwards by the collar, just in time to avoid a serious blow from the recoiling gun.

I turned angrily round to ascertain what reckless individual it was who had thus dared to lay unholy hands upon me, when my thoughts were diverted by a ringing cheer from all hands. My shot had lodged in the Frenchman's mainmast-head, just above the cap; and, while we still looked, away went the main-topmast dragging the fore-topgallant-mast down with it. I received a vast amount of praise for my exploit, but of course it was merely a lucky shot, with which skill had nothing whatever to do.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FIRST CAPTURE.



AFTER this we rapidly overhauled the chase, and by the time that her crew had got the wreck cleared out of the way, were once more alongside.

The French crew had ceased firing their stern-chasers upon the fall of their main-topmast, and it was the opinion of many that they had struck, their flag coming down with their topmast, and not being re-hoisted ; we therefore ceased firing also, but before we were fairly alongside they had rigged a small staff out over their taffrail, and had run their flag up again.

We were approaching the Frenchman upon his starboard quarter, with the intention of pouring in our larboard broadside directly the two ships were fairly abreast, when our antagonist suddenly ported his helm, and threw himself right athwart our hawse, the evolution being performed exactly at the instant which rendered a collision unavoidable. Our helm was immediately put hard-a-starboard, with the intention of passing under his stern if possible, but there was not sufficient room, and we struck him just abaft his main chains, the shock bringing down his mainmast, which had previously been badly wounded ; while at the same moment his starboard broadside came crashing in through our bows with most destructive effect ; one of our guns being dismounted, the foremast struck in two places within a foot of each other, and the wheel smashed to pieces. Singularly enough the helmsman escaped without a scratch, but one poor fellow fell forward upon his gun, disembowelled.

The wind being light, the shock of the collision was very gentle, and did no damage to the hull of either vessel. The two brigs dropped alongside each other, head and stern, and would soon have scraped clear again, but the French threw their grapnels into our rigging the instant that we dropped alongside, and immediately boarded.

The whole thing was so sudden that Captain Brisac was for a single instant confused ; he rallied the next, however, and shouting "Boarders, repel boarders !" put himself at the head of our men.

The French captain led on his boarding party with magnificent dash and resolution, and for the first minute our men were driven irresistibly back. Then came the turn of the tide, the English, maddened at the disgrace of being forced to yield their ground to their hated enemies, recovered themselves, and in their turn pressed the French back again, every inch of the deck being fiercely contested. Captain Brisac and the French captain soon singled each other out, and after a few unavailing efforts succeeded in reaching each other and crossing swords. Our skipper was a slight man of middle height and no very great personal strength, while the Frenchman was a perfect giant ; the fight between them therefore was a very unequal one, especially as Captain Brisac possessed but little skill with the sword. A few passes were made without any effect on either side, and then the Frenchman made a downward cut at his antagonist's head, with such tremendous force that the skipper's guard was fairly beaten down, and had not his adversary's cutlass turned its edge he would, in all probability, have been cloven to the chin ; as it was, he received a heavy blow on the head with the back of the weapon which partially stunned him, and placed him completely at the French captain's mercy.

The cutlass was instantly raised to repeat the stroke, when, in an agony of apprehension at the imminent danger which threatened the man who had shown me so much kindness, I drew a pistol from my belt, and, thrusting its muzzle into the Frenchman's face, pulled the trigger. The man flung up his arms and fell backwards dead, his distorted features, all blood-bespattered, presenting a hideous sight which haunted me for many a day afterwards. The sight of blood is said to madden some animals, and I am sure it maddened me, for, furious with excitement, I forthwith dashed headlong into the thickest of the *mêlée*, quite regardless of consequences, using with such savage freedom a cutlass which I snatched out of the hand of a wounded man, that the French recoiled on every side with looks of dismay, while our own men, pressing forward with renewed vigour, at length drove the enemy back to their own ship.

"Hurrah, lads ! after them !" I exclaimed, far too excited to give a thought to the singularity of a newly-made midshipman presuming to assume the leadership in the presence of his superiors. Our men caught my enthusiasm, responding with a ringing cheer ; and after them we went, helter-skelter, so rapidly that English and

French tumbled over the bulwarks together. There was a momentary effort on the part of the French to make a stand on reaching their own deck; but they were, as a crew, now thoroughly demoralized, and our lads, their blood at last completely roused, gave them no time to rally, but cut down every man who offered the slightest opposition. Seeing that their case was hopeless, the French crew flung down their arms and cried for quarter, and in less than two minutes from the instant of boarding, we found ourselves masters of the "Sans-Culotte" privateer, mounting eight long 8-pounders and four 12-pound carronades, and with a crew originally of eighty-one men, of whom nine were killed and twenty wounded; our own loss being one man killed and one wounded. The action lasted three hours, and proved to be the first engagement of the war, much to the gratification of Mr. Sennitt, who was intensely anxious for the distinction of sending in the first prize.

The first duty was of course to secure possession, after which, the weather appearing likely to continue fine, the hands were piped to dinner—such dinner, that is, as could be procured on the spur of the moment, the galley fire having been extinguished at the time of clearing for action. Captain Brisac allowed an hour for this meal and a little repose, at the expiration of which all hands were set to work to clear away the wreck and repair damages, a task which kept us busy until considerably after sunset. By eight p.m., however, our preparations were complete, a prize crew was placed on board the "Sans-Culotte," and a nice little breeze having in the meantime sprung up from the westward, we made sail in company, shaping a course for Plymouth, off which we arrived about noon the next day.

The prize, now being safe from all chance of recapture, was sent in, while the "Scourge," hauling her wind upon the star-board tack, reached off the land on her way back to her appointed cruising-ground.

On the following day, about an hour before the time for serving dinner in the cabin, Patterson, the captain's steward, popped his head in at the door of the midshipmen's berth and announced,—

"Captain's compliments, and he will be glad to have the pleasure of Mr. Chester's company at dinner."

"Tell Captain Brisac with my compliments that I am much obliged for his courteous invitation, which I accept with very great pleasure," I responded, looking up from the "Day's Work" upon which I was busy with my slate and pencil.

"You're a lucky dog, Chester!" exclaimed young Harvey; "you seem to have dropped plump into the skipper's good books all at

once. It is not often that we mids are honoured with an invitation to the cabin table, I can tell you."

"Oh! come now, Harvey, I protest against your imposing upon the unfortunate Chester in that manner," interposed little Markham (nicknamed "Goliath" because he measured exactly three feet, six inches in his stockings). "You know as well as I do that he is invited into the cabin to-night, in order that the skipper may give him a good wiggling for that boarding business yesterday. I hope he won't be *very* hard upon you, old chap," he added, in a tone of deep sympathy, turning to me, "for somehow I have taken quite a liking to you, and if I had been at your elbow yesterday, instead of that over-grown lout, Harvey, I would have kept you out of the serape. You must be very quiet and submissive when he pitches into you, and plead ignorance—say you will be a good boy and not do it again, you know."

"But have I really done anything very dreadful?" I inquired, more than half taken in by the young monkey's serious manner.

"Oh, Lord! hold me, somebody, while I faint!" he exclaimed, turning up the whites of his eyes like a dying duck in a thunder-storm, and flinging himself so suddenly backwards into the arms of Harvey that the latter went down stern foremost, landing on the deck with one hand in the beef-kid and the other in the blacking-box, while Markham rolled on the top of him, kicking spasmodically, and simulating the feeble struggles of an expiring person.

Luckily for "Goliath," it was the ludicrous side of this episode which presented itself most strongly to his victim, or a sound thrashing would, in all probability, have been his portion; as it was, the pair scrambled to their feet again with a hearty laugh, as good friends as ever.

"I declare, Chester, you'll be the death of me some day, if you go on like this," resumed my would-be tormentor; "your touching innocence would move a brass monkey to tears. Why," he continued, looking round and addressing in low, measured tones, intended to express overwhelming astonishment, the fragment of glass which still clung to one corner of its frame, and, hanging suspended against the bulkhead, did duty as a mirror—"he asks if he has really done anything very dreadful!! Is it actually possible, my gentle infant, that you are ignorant of the fact that you yesterday took the command out of your superior officers' hands, and that the punishment for such a crime—when it happens to be a first offence—is keelhauling, while a repetition thereof is visited with the extreme penalty of the law?"

"And pray what is *keelhauling*?" I inquired, beginning to perceive that my mercurial friend was merely indulging in a joke at my expense.

"Keelhauling, sir," he replied, "is a form of punishment which consists in being lashed to a stout rope which is passed under the ship's bottom, and whereby the unhappy criminal is dragged along the keel from forward, aft ; he being required, during the journey, to gather a sufficiency of barnacles off the ship's bottom to furnish a satisfying breakfast for the captain next morning. If the unfortunate wretch fails, the process is to be repeated, with this addition, that on the second occasion the quantity of barnacles provided is to be sufficient for both the captain and the first lieutenant."

"Good gracious, how horrible !" I exclaimed, assuming as well as I could an expression of serious concern. "I had no idea I was exposing myself to the risk of such a fearful punishment. What would you advise me to do?"

"Well, that is by no means an easy question to answer," he replied. "I'll tell you what I'll do, though. I should like to help you out of the scrape if I can, and I'll take an opportunity of speaking to the skipper before he goes down to dinner, and asking him not to pass sentence of punishment upon you for the present. Then, if you'll keep my watch for me to-night, I'll get another interview with him on the quiet while you are doing so. I have some little influence with him—my modesty forbids me to say how I got it—and if I ask him *for my sake* to forgive you, he may very possibly do so. I expect he'll make some reference to the affair while at dinner though, and if he does, your only chance will be to keep him in a good-humour, which you can easily do if you only know how."

"But unfortunately I *don't* know how !" I exclaimed, infusing as much anxiety as I could into my tone and manner.

"No?" returned he. "Well, I'll tell you, if you solemnly engage never, under any circumstances, to divulge the source of your information."

I thought this extremely good, with Harvey sitting by, demurely listening to the conversation, but, instead of saying so, I gravely entered into the required engagement.

"That's all right," he remarked. "Now listen attentively to me. The skipper has one overpowering weakness, and that is a fondness for a comic song. Let him be ever so exasperated, a comic song—a *good* comic song, mind you—never fails to soothe him. Therefore, if he should happen to-night, by any chance, to refer to your unfortunate lapse of duty yesterday, listen patiently and respectfully to all

that he has to say, and when he has finished, even if what he says strikes you as being of a laudatory character—he is a very curious fellow in that respect, often beginning by praising a man, when he means to end by blowing him up sky-high—just bow to him and say, ‘With your permission, sir, I will now change the subject by singing a comic song,’ and strike up boldly at once. I may safely venture to say you will be supremely astonished at the effect you will produce, and if—”

“Mr. Clewline wishes to see you on deck *at once*, please, Mr. Markham,” said a marine, popping his head in at the door.

“Oh ! all right,” returned Markham. “I’ll be up in a minute or two. It’s a great nuisance, but I assure you, my dear Chester, that poor, old Clewline is positively at sea, unless he has me constantly at his right hand to—”

“Mr. Clewline said, if you didn’t come at once, Mr. Markham, I was to just fetch ye,” said the marine, introducing his head once more.

“Very well, lead on, fellow, I follow,” ejaculated he of Gath in a voice expressive of deep disgust, and he forthwith disappeared up the steep ladder, followed by a hearty peal of laughter from us, his late audience.

“What a fellow it is !” exclaimed Harvey presently. “I am very glad to see that you understand him, Chester. Otherwise, I am afraid he would have got you into no end of scrapes. Not that he *means* any harm, far from it. He is one of the best-natured fellows alive, but he is so wedded to practical joking that I believe nothing will ever break him of it. He keeps the whole ship alive, as you will have seen by this time ; but he is always in disgrace, and during the last cruise may be said to have taken up his permanent abode at the mast-head : I daresay he is there now.”

It was even so, for when I went aft to the cabin, in compliance with the captain’s invitation, a glance aloft revealed him comfortably perched on the crosstrees, from which commanding position he reminded me pantomimically of the potent charm to be found in a comic song.

The dinner-party, that evening, consisted of Captain Brisac, Mr. Sennitt, old Bolus the doctor, and myself. The table was liberally furnished, the wine good, and the party in excellent spirits, as was natural after securing a prize so speedily. Moreover, Captain Brisac was a thorough gentleman, and knew exactly how to make his guests feel at ease, which is not always the case where the superior is also the host. The conversation turned pretty fre-

quently, as might be expected, on technical matters, but there were frequent divergences in the shape of laughter-provoking anecdotes, in which the doctor shone forth conspicuously.

It was not, however, until after the cloth had been removed that the skipper made any reference to the occurrences of the previous day. Then, addressing himself to me, he said, "Let me take this opportunity, Mr. Chester, of thanking you for saving my life yesterday. But for your timely interposition, I must infallibly have been killed; and I thank you very sincerely for the promptitude with which you acted. Sailors are not in the habit of making overmuch of such services; we perform them for each other, and think very little about it; but the fact remains, all the same, and I shall not forget it. I have also to thank you for the conspicuous gallantry you displayed in boarding the prize, gallantry which evidently had a strong effect upon the men, and contributed in no inconsiderable degree to our success. So pleased am I with your conduct that I have felt justified in making special mention of you in the despatch which I sent in with the prize, and I think I may venture to promise you that what I have said will be found to exercise a favourable influence on your future prospects. Go on as you have begun, and you will do well. Above all things, study hard; you will find it uphill work at first, no doubt, but every step you take will make those which succeed it easier, until you will at length find that you can acquire naturally and without effort all the knowledge that is required to make you proficient in your profession. Of course I do not mean that you should give your *whole* time to study, a little recreation now and then is not only allowable, but beneficial; but do not give your whole thoughts to play, as I am sadly afraid your messmate Markham does."

This mention of my mercurial friend brought back so vividly to my mind the recent scene in our berth that I was—as the newspaper reporters say—"risibly affected," a circumstance which did not fail to attract general attention.

Captain Brisac looked both disconcerted and annoyed. "What is it, Mr. Chester? What have I said to afford you so much amusement?" he asked.

"I beg your pardon, sir," I replied. "I was not laughing at anything *you* said, but your mention of Mr. Markham reminded me of something ridiculous which *he* said. I hope you will be pleased to excuse me, sir. I should be extremely sorry to do anything having the appearance of rudeness or disrespect."

"I feel quite sure you would," returned the skipper, his brow clearing once more, and an amused look coming into his eyes.

‘But let us hear what that jocular young gentleman has been saying ; it is not a state secret, I suppose, is it ?’

“Oh dear no, sir ; at the same time I know he would never have said it, had he had the least idea it would ever reach your ears ; it was only a little bit of fun on his part—an attempt, in fact, to impose upon me.”

“Out with it, Mr. Chester,” exclaimed the doctor, his eyes fairly dancing with fun ; “I’ll be sworn he has been in some way taking your name in vain, sir,” he continued, turning to the captain.

“I think it more than likely, but it is quite impossible to feel offended with the lad, he is always so utterly devoid of anything like evil intention.”

Seeing that my narrative would not be likely to do any harm, I thereupon proceeded to tell my story, which proved productive of a great deal of laughter. At its conclusion the skipper said, “Pour yourself out another glass of wine, Mr. Chester, and then, I suppose, I must excuse you. Mr. Sennitt will not easily forgive me, if I prevent you from keeping your proper watch.”

On reaching the deck I found that the wind had hauled round to about W.N.W., bringing with it a raw and dismal fog, which speedily saturated with moisture everything with which it came in contact. As the night wore on, it became more and more dense, and by midnight it had become so thick that it was impossible to see from one end of the ship to the other, and Captain Brisac gave orders for the “Scourge” to be hove-to. The vessel was accordingly brought to the wind on the starboard tack, with her head pointing in the direction of the French coast, and the watch, with the exception of half-a-dozen of the smartest hands, who were placed on the look-out, were allowed to dispose themselves about the deck in the most sheltered spots they could find.

The fog lasted all through the first watch, and when I went on deck at midnight to take my turn of duty, it was thicker than ever. The vapour came sweeping down upon the ship in great opaque masses, some of which were so dense that it was barely possible to distinguish objects on the opposite side of the deck, while the lower yards were only visible from the deck at very rare periods. The few men moving about loomed more like gigantic shadows than human beings, and the binnacle lamps (the only lights visible) emitted a feeble and ghostly glimmer which hardly sufficed to render visible the features of the man who stood by the wheel. No lights of any kind were exhibited on board the “Scourge,” Captain Brisac preferring to trust to a good look-out, and the precautions adopted by other vessels, for our safety from collision, rather than

run the risk of betraying our presence to an enemy by the exhibition of lights. For the same reason he had given orders that the ship's bell should on no account whatever be struck during the continuance of the thick weather.

Somehow I could not help thinking that the skipper's precautions exposed us to a great deal of danger. Supposing, for example, that some other ship, practising the same "precautions," happened to be in our immediate neighbourhood and approaching us on the opposite tack, what would be the result? Why, in all probability the two craft would fall on board each other, inflicting serious mutual damage, amounting perhaps to the complete destruction of one or both. The idea made me very uneasy, so much so, indeed, that, my imagination at length becoming excited, I was on the point of giving an alarm at least a dozen times, thinking every now and then that I could discern the dim outline of a strange ship sweeping silently down upon us like a gigantic ghost. So strong, indeed, did the illusion at length become, that I could have sworn I caught a momentary glimpse of a light to windward, and, after hesitating a few minutes, I became so convinced that I *had* seen a light, that I went up to Mr. Sennitt and reported it.

"A light, Mr. Chester. Where away?" said he rather anxiously.

"Here, sir," I replied; "broad on our starboard quarter."

He gazed steadfastly in the direction I had indicated for two or three minutes, and then turned away, saying,—

"You did quite right, my lad, to speak to me, but I really think you must have been mistaken. Why, if it had really been so, the stranger must have been close aboard of us; it would be impossible to see an ordinary light at a much greater distance than a hundred fathoms in such a fog as this; why, it is thick enough to cut with a knife, the old barkie can scarcely force her way through it."

As he finished speaking I seemed to catch another glimpse of the light, just for a single instant, and I breathlessly exclaimed, "There it is again, sir!"

"I can see nothing," he returned somewhat impatiently, after taking another long look. "Here, let us go round and examine the look-out men."

Every man was found broad awake and keenly watchful, yet none of them had seen anything resembling a light, or indeed anything at all of a nature to lead them to suppose that there was another ship in close proximity to ourselves. I could not believe that my imagination had been playing me a trick, yet it required no very great penetration on my part to see that my superior thought but little of my assertion in comparison with the reports of the look-

out men. We both returned to the spot from which we had started, and stood intently gazing to windward, until, for my part, I was almost ready to declare upon oath that the atmosphere was full of faint twinkling lights. The impression was beginning to force itself upon me that I had been making a fool of myself, and I was about to say so, when a faint and almost imperceptible sound seemed to float down to us out of the thick folds of impenetrable mist to windward.

“There, sir!” I exclaimed; “did you hear nothing then?”

“Why, to tell you the truth, Mr. Chester, I half thought I did,” replied Sennitt; “but after all I believe it is only fancy; your imagination has infected my own, and if we stand here much longer we shall fancy a whole French fleet there to windward. Luckily it is eight bells,” he continued, consulting his watch by the light of the binnacle, “so we will turn the ship over to the care of a fresh set of eyes and ears. Let the watch be called as quietly as possible.”

This was done, and so completely had I already acquired that confidence which is conveyed in the expression “Let those look out who have the watch,” that, notwithstanding all my previous apprehensions, in another ten minutes I was fast asleep.

CHAPTER V.

WE FLY FROM THE FRENCHMAN.

WHEN I went on deck again at the change of the watches, it was still very thick, but the breeze was freshening, and it and the sun together promised soon to disperse the vapour. It was still so thick, however, that it was impossible to see more than three or four lengths away from the vessel, and the "Scourge" was consequently kept hove-to.

The skipper had made his appearance on deck for a few minutes before sitting down to breakfast, and about nine o'clock he came up again, just as the fog had begun to clear away in earnest, opening up like a curtain every now and then, and showing clear spaces of about half a mile or so in extent, then settling down again as thick as ever, but each time clearing away more thoroughly, and revealing larger and still larger open spaces. At length the mist lifted for a moment to such an extent that it became possible to see to a distance of perhaps a couple of miles, and as it did so there was a simultaneous hail from the look-out aloft and five or six of the hands on deck of "Sail ho !"

"Sail ho ! sure enough," exclaimed the skipper and Mr. Sennitt, as both caught sight of the stranger at the same moment. "A frigate ! French, too, as I'm a living sinner," continued the first luff, taking a squint through his glass at the craft. "Ah ! he is as sharp-sighted as we are," he went on, with the telescope still at his eye. "Up goes his helm, and there go the lads aloft to make sail, he's coming down to say 'how d'ye do' to us, sir. And there goes the tricolour up to his peak."

"Hard up with the helm, my man," said Captain Brisac very quietly to the helmsman. "Turn the hands up, and pack on her, Mr. Sennitt ; discretion is the better part of valour with us just now, and our only chance is to show Johnny Crapaud a clean pair of heels."

Our lads flew aloft like lightning, and away we went staggering

to leeward, with stunsails alow and aloft on the port side, steering a course which would take us pretty directly up Channel. So smart were the "Scourge" in making sail that they were all down on deck again, and every inch of our canvas dragging at us like a cart-horse, before the Frenchman had got his stunsail-booms fairly rigged out.

As soon as we had got the canvas fairly set, ropes all coiled down, and the decks generally cleared up, I slipped down into the berth for my telescope, with which I returned to the deck, and proceeded to make a deliberate inspection of our unwelcome neighbour.

She was about a mile and a half distant from us, bearing a couple of points on our weather quarter, and I thought I had never seen a more beautiful sight than she presented, as she came foaming after us, with the sun lighting up her snowy canvas and flashing brightly from her burnished copper as she rose on the crest of the swell, showing her cutwater half-way down to the keel. Her sails were evidently new—so new, indeed, that they had scarcely had time to stretch to their proper dimensions—and her paint looked fresh and clean ; these circumstances impressing the acute Mr. Sennitt with the conviction that the craft was fresh out of the dockyard from an extensive overhaul, or that she was a new vessel. The beautiful and graceful model of her hull, and the smart appearance of her spars and rigging, induced him to incline very strongly to the latter supposition.

It soon became evident that this beautiful craft was going nearly two feet to our one, but she was steered so shamefully that she had not materially decreased the distance between us at the end of the first hour ; our hopes, therefore, which had sunk to zero with the imminent prospect of a French prison before our eyes, began once more to soar skyward as mile after mile slipped away beneath our flying keel, and every minute increased the probability of our falling in with one of our own cruisers. The skipper was dreadfully put out at being obliged to run away, but though the French frigate was very nearly dead astern she yawed about sufficiently to enable us to count sixteen ports of a side, and even Mr. Sennitt—who was accounted the greatest fire-eater on board—was fain to acknowledge that this was just a gun or two too many for us.

By four bells every trace of the fog had cleared away, the sun shone brilliantly in a cloudless sky, the air had a decided feeling of warmth in it, the westerly breeze blew freshly, and the waves curled crisply and broke into foam at their crests under its enlivening influence ; altogether it was a thoroughly delightful day, such as is occasionally to be met with toward the end of March—a day

when winter and summer have fairly met to fight for the mastery, and summer is getting it all her own way. As time sped on, and still no friendly sail appeared, while the frigate astern drew more and more perceptibly up to us, anxiety once more resumed its sway, and frequent were the admonitions to the look-out aloft to "keep his weather eye lifting."

At length the Frenchmen decided to try the range of their guns, and opened fire upon us from their lee bow-chaser. The shot flew wide, but it went far enough beyond us to show that we were fairly within range. Another and another followed, and still we were unscathed. An interval of about a quarter of an hour elapsed before they again fired, and when they did the shot was somewhat better aimed, passing through the main and fore-topsails and falling into the sea a considerable distance ahead.

"I think we are now near enough to venture upon a return of the compliment, Mr. Sennitt," said the skipper. "Let Tompion see what he can do with the stern-chaser, in the way of knocking away some of the fellow's spars. It seems a pity to spoil so pretty a picture, but better that than for us to experience the delights of a French prison."

Tompion was accordingly summoned and bid do his best to "wing" the Frenchman, a task to which he devoted himself with great gravity and a considerable assumption of importance. The gun, after being carefully loaded, was trained with the most scrupulous nicety, and then Tompion, trigger-line in hand, stood squinting along the sights until a favourable moment arrived, when—there was a concussion; the smoke cleared away, and a shot-hole was seen in the frigate's foresail, very nearly in a line with the mast.

"Very prettily shot, Tompion," said the skipper; "try again. A few inches nearer, and you would have buried that shot in his foremast. Wound the spars if you can; the breeze seems inclined to freshen; and if you can gouge a good substantial piece out of some of his lighter spars, the wind will do the rest for us by sending them handsomely over his bows."

In a few minutes more away sped a second of the worthy Tompion's messengers; it, too, passed through the foresail, close to the yard, but apparently without doing any further damage. In the meantime the Frenchmen were by no means idle with their guns, and our running-gear began to be somewhat cut up; luckily, however, the damage was of an unimportant character, and such as could be put right in a few minutes, with the aid of a marline-spike and a grease-shoe. The firing now became more rapid on both sides; but though the spars on each side had several narrow escapes,

none had, so far, fallen, and the damage done seemed in each case to be but of the most trifling description.

At length Mr. Sennitt walked aft and said, "Let me try my hand, Tompion ; I used to be considered rather a crack shot on board the old 'Dido.'"

Tompion, of course, resigned his place to his superior officer, though it was evident from the expression of his phiz that he had no great faith in the first luff's shooting powers. But our worthy "first" speedily justified his boast ; for his shot struck the boom-iron at the Frenchman's larboard fore-yard-arm, snapping it off, unshipping the boom, and creating a very pretty state of confusion with the topmast and lower stunsails and their gear.

A ringing cheer was raised on board the "Scourge" at this success, and Sennitt was about to try his hand a second time, when the frigate was seen to yaw broad off her course ; a thin streak of flame flashed along her side, a veil of white fleecy smoke started into view, and was wafted aside by the wind, and sixteen twelve-pound shot—the entire contents of her starboard broadside—came whistling about our ears. I was standing aft, close to the taffrail, on the port side, at the moment, and one of the shot came crashing in at the stern-port nearest me, striking the stanchion heavily, and making the splinters fly in all directions, one of them striking me on the left temple, ripping up the skin and baring my poor unfortunate skull for a length of some four inches. The blow stunned me just for a moment, and I fell to the deck ; but before any one had time to pick me up, I had recovered and staggered to my feet again, feeling a trifle confused, and somewhat sick—if the truth may be told—at the sight of my own blood, which streamed down over my face copiously, rendering me, I have no doubt, a truly ghastly spectacle ; but otherwise I felt not much the worse.

The frigate was at this time scarcely half-a-mile distant, and had her guns been properly served, the broadside to which she had treated us ought to have left us floating a helpless wreck on the water, and completely at her mercy ; but, instead of this, the shot which damaged me was the only one which could be said to have taken effect ; the remainder of the broadside passing some through our sails, and some wide of their mark altogether.

"A miss is as good as a mile," remarked the skipper to Sennitt, after he had glanced round, and noted the trifling damage done. "Hillo, Chester, are you hurt, my lad ?" he added, addressing me, as he observed my gory visage. "Slip down to the doctor, and get him to clap a plaster over your mast-head, and then turn in, if you like. What a set of lubbers they are aboard that frigate !" he

continued to Sennitt. "Had she been English, instead of French, that broadside would have blown us out of the water. I have been for the last ten minutes seriously thinking of hauling down the colours, rather than risk a heavy sacrifice of life ; but if that is the best they can do, we will hold on everything, at all events for a short time longer. I wonder whether there would be any chance of—" and he said something in so low a tone that I did not catch it.

Sennitt pondered deeply for a minute, then he looked up and said, "Upon my word, sir, I think it would. Our lads are rather raw, but they behaved splendidly in the case of the privateer, and so, I believe, they would now. Yes, I think it might have just a chance of success ; a bold rush often does wonders."

"You are right, Sennitt. Call the hands aft, if you please, and let us see how they take the proposal."

My head was beginning to ache most villainously, but curiosity got the better of me for the moment, and I determined to postpone my visit to friend Bolus, until I had heard what the skipper had to say.

In a minute or two every man was on the quarter-deck, hat in hand, and expectancy in every feature.

"My lads," commenced the skipper, "I have sent for you, because I have a proposition to make, and I wish to see for myself how you individually take it. When the frigate astern was first made out this morning, I was in hopes that the little 'Scourge' would prove active enough to keep us out of reach of the Frenchman's shot ; but you have seen for yourselves how completely fallacious that hope has been. The frigate goes two feet to our one, and were she being fought as so beautiful a craft ought to be, all hands of us would, by this time, be fairly under way for a French prison. But you see how it is ; there are a lot of tinkers and tailors aboard there ; they are not seamen, and do not deserve the luck of being sent to sea in such a fine vessel ; it is evident that, though they may possibly know how to sail her, they cannot fight her. They cannot possibly keep her long ; the English are *certain* to have her sooner or later, and since that is the case, why should not *we* have her? No, stay a moment ; don't cheer, lads, until you have heard me out. Of course, anything like a regularly fought action between us and her is out of the question ; she is a two-and-thirty twelve-pounder, against which we can only show eight six pounders ; a single broadside from her—*well* delivered—would send us to the bottom. But I think there is just a possibility—by a little manœuvring on our part—of getting alongside her ; and if that can be done, I am of opinion that, by a bold rush from

all hands, we might secure possession of her. No doubt there will be plenty of hard knocks to be had for the asking ; but even that is better than a French prison. What say you, my lads ? ”

A hearty cheer was the first response ; then there was a general putting of heads together, and much eager talking for about a couple of minutes. Finally a topman—one Bob Adams—a magnificent specimen of the British tar, a perfect Hercules in build, and one of the prime seamen of the ship, shouldered his way to the front, and, with an elaborate sea-scrape and a tug at his forelock, addressed the skipper,—

“ We hopes your honour will excuse us, if we’ve taken a minute or two to work out this here traverse, and reduce it to plain sailing ; but the purposal as your honour has laid athwart our hawse fetched us all up standin’ just at first, and it warn’t until we’d had time to pay off, and gather way on t’other tack, as I may say, that we was able to get the bearins of it. You see, sir, there’s only about sixty on us all told, now that we’ve sent away a prize crew, and we reckon that there ain’t far short of 220 hands aboard of Johnny, yonder. Nevertheless and notwithstanding, howsumdever, as your honour says, they’re little better than so many tailors, and tailors was never worth very much that ever any of us heard on at a good stand-up fight ; so the long and the short of it is this, sir ; you put us alongside, and *we’ll have her* in the twinklin’ of a purser’s lantern. Ain’t that it, boys ? ”

“ Aye, aye, that’s it, Bob ; you’ve paid it out without so much as a single kink ; we mean to have her,” responded a voice in the crowd.

“ Then three cheers for the skipper, and may he get us lots of prize-money,” exhorted Bob, to the intense amusement of Captain Brisac ; and the cheers were given with such energy that I have no doubt they were distinctly heard on board the Frenchman.

Captain Brisac briefly thanked the men for their plucky response to his call, and then sent them back to their quarters, all impatience for the eventful moment to arrive.

The frigate was rapidly nearing us, but I thought there would be time to get my head plastered up ; so I rushed below, and found Bolus standing at the table, with his coat off and his shirt-sleeves rolled up ; a formidable array of long, narrow-bladed knives, sharp enough to cut one if only *looked* hard at, on one hand, and an equally formidable array of saws, tweezers, long needles, silken thread, &c., &c., on the other.

“ Here, doctor,” I exclaimed ; “ the skipper’s compliments, and will you ‘clap a plaster over my mast-head,’ and bear a hand about

it, please ; the Frenchman will be alongside of us in less than five minutes, and we are going to board and carry him with a rush."

"And *you*, I presume, intend to head the boarders as usual," remarked the doctor, with a quiet grin. "What is the extent of the damage? Here, sit down and let me have a look at it ; don't be impatient ; I'll undertake to tinker you up as good as new in two or three minutes," he continued, as I seated myself, and he began to sponge the blood away. "There is no great harm done, merely a simple laceration of the scalp. There, I think that will keep the top of your head from blowing off, until after you have demolished the Frenchman. I should dearly like to go with you, but what would my poor patients do, if I happened to get an unlucky knock on the head? No ; I must remain where I am, I suppose, though it's too bad that I should be cooped up here, while others are having all the fun. Now you may go as soon as you please, but look here, my boy," he added in quite a different tone ; "take care of yourself ; a knock on the head, such as you have had, is very apt to make one giddy, and giddiness is an awkward mishap at a critical moment ; take my advice, and remain quietly below until all is over."

CHAPTER VI.

OUR "DASHING EXPLOIT."



THE doctor's advice was well meant, and no doubt good, but I was too excited to think so at the moment, so I darted on deck just in time to hear the skipper say,—

"Now, lads, he is coming up on our port quarter. Run the starboard guns over to port, and load fore and aft with a round shot and a charge of grape on top of it. Give the muzzles a good elevation, and fire at the moment that the two ships touch, then away on board for your lives, and recollect, the first blow is half the battle, so let it be a good hard one. Steady now, here she comes."¹

During my visit to the doctor's den, sail had been shortened on board the "Scourge," down to the topsails jib, and driver; the stunsails being stowed and the booms run in; while the courses, topgallant sails, and royals were merely clewed up. The Frenchman evidently had been a great deal mystified by this manœuvre and the cessation of firing on our part; and now, while he was ranging up on our port quarter, and so close that one might almost have hove a biscuit on board, all was confusion with him; the hands being busy taking in their canvas in a slipshod, lubberly way that would have disgraced a collier; while the babble of tongues must have been deafening, judging from what we heard of it.

Our skipper was standing just abaft the main rigging, conning the ship, with one hand on the topmast backstay all ready for a spring, while he signalled the helmsman with the other. Sennitt was forward, also ready for the rush; while Mr. Clewline, who with a dozen hands was to remain on board and take care of the

¹ It may be necessary to explain to the uninitiated reader that the terms "he" and "she" are indifferently used at sea, in reference to craft, but when the masculine pronoun is applied it is understood to refer more especially to the *commanding officer* of the vessel; while the pronoun "she" refers to the *vessel herself*.—H. C.

ship, was in the waist. The men stood at their guns, with their cutlasses drawn, the captains with the trigger-lines in their hands, ready to fire at the instant of collision. Harvey was forward with Mr. Sennitt ; while little Markham and I stood by to follow in the skipper's wake.

As the frigate drew up abreast of us, her captain sprang into the mizen rigging and hailed through a speaking trumpet, "Mais, Monsieur le capitaine, why you shall not haul down votre drapeau ; Vous avez se rendre, n'est pas ?"

Captain Brisac raised his hand to his mouth as though to reply ; waving it at the same time for the helmsman to sheer us alongside ; the men with the grappling irons being crouched under the bulwarks all ready to heave ; and all hands fore and aft straining forward like hounds in leash, waiting breathlessly for the coming shock.

"What ship is that?" hailed the skipper ; not that he wanted particularly to know, just at that moment ; he hoped to find out for himself very shortly ; but the question served to fill up time until the moment for action should arrive.

"' L'Audacieuse ; ' frégate de—" began the French captain ; when an officer sprang into the rigging beside him, and said something in an excited manner, pointing at us and gesticulating with frightful vehemence.

In the meantime our helmsman, touching the wheel as daintily as though we had been sailing a match, brought us alongside so cleverly that the two ships touched with a shock which was barely perceptible, just enough in fact "to swear by," as the gunner remarked.

"Heave !" shouted Sennitt to the men with the grappling irons, "Fire !" roared the skipper ; and away went our double broadside crash into the Frenchman, eliciting such a chorus of shrieks and yells as might lead one to suppose that Pandemonium had broken loose. Three or four of the frigate's guns replied : and there was an ominous crashing among our spars ; but no one paused to ascertain the extent of the damage ; and our men had sprung like tigers into the frigate's rigging almost before our own guns had exploded ; they were, therefore, so far safe. Captain Brisac made a dash at the frigate's mizen rigging while giving the word to fire ; with Markham and myself close upon his heels ; but before he had fairly got a hold of the ratlines a sponge was thrust out of one of the upper deck ports, catching him in the face, and inflicting such a blow that he fell back upon us unfortunate midshipmen, and would have gone down between the two ships had we not caught him

unceremoniously by the collar and steadied him on his feet again.

The sponge was the reverse of clean, and the blow had been delivered with such hearty good-will just between the eyes that our venerated commander's claret was very effectually tapped ; he presented therefore a somewhat alarming spectacle as he flung himself in upon the Frenchman's deck ; his face black from contact with the foul sponge, the dingy colour being pleasantly relieved by bold streaks and dashes of crimson.

"Mille diables !" ejaculated the astonished French captain, as this apparition appeared before him—he having jumped down on deck again as we ranged alongside ; and he placed himself on guard in the most approved fashion. Captain Brisac had no more knowledge of sword-play than he had of flying, a circumstance which often proved exceedingly embarrassing—to his adversaries, for he had a rough-and-ready way of handling his weapon which, if not so scientific, was equally as effective as the utmost refinements of the thoroughly accomplished swordsman. Instead therefore of engaging, as his antagonist evidently expected, he simply bore down the guard by sheer strength of wrist, and rushing in upon his astounded adversary, delivered a blow with his left hand straight from the shoulder, which laid the unhappy Frenchman senseless upon his own deck. "Hurrah, lads !" he shouted ; "give it them right and left ; drive the rascals below or overboard, and push forward to meet Mr. Sennitt." The division which had boarded with us, abaft, replied with a cheer, which was responded to by Sennitt's party forward ; and away we went, driving the French along the deck before us until they were all huddled up amidships between the two parties of boarders : and there they made a most determined stand.

And now ensued a fierce and sanguinary hand-to-hand conflict ; our men still pressing impetuously forward ; and the French opposing us with a resolution which their previous conduct had given us no reason whatever to expect, obstinately contesting with us every inch of the deck, and, if they yielded for a moment, renewing the defence more actively than ever ; cutlasses and pikes were used with savage freedom ; and the dead and wounded encumbered the decks until they became almost impassable.

The fight had been raging thus furiously for some three or four minutes without our gaining any perceptible advantage ; our men were falling fast ; and it became evident that unless something decisive were speedily done, we should be overpowered by sheer force of numbers. The French were congregated in a compact

group amidships, our party being divided into two, one of which had been led on board aft by the skipper, while the other had followed Mr. Sennitt forward ; the French were consequently between us and the lieutenant's party. It occurred to me that if Mr. Clewline could pour a charge or two of grape into the crowd of Frenchmen, it might have the effect of freshening their way ; and I was pushing towards the bulwarks intending to slip down on board the "Scourge" and see what could be done, when I observed for the first time that she was no longer alongside ; and on looking farther I caught a glimpse of her through one of the open ports, lying about a couple of cables' lengths distant.

I called Markham's attention to this ; at the same time mentioning what I had thought about the grape.

"A capital notion, young-un !" he replied. "Your infantile intellect is really developing with marvellous rapidity. Clewline can't be communicated with, however, where he is ; so we must just do the best we can for ourselves. And look here ! here is a six-pounder cast loose and all ready to our hands ; watch the roll of the ship, and we can run it right inboard—here you, Peters—" to one of the seamen, "lend a hand here to run in this gun and slew it round with its muzzle forward. So ! that's just right ; now then for a charge ; do you see a—? Oh, here's a cartridge ; in with it ; ram it well down, Peters ; and you, Chester, see if you can find anything to put in on top of the powder ;—marline-spikes ; tenpenny nails ; empty bottles ; blue pills and black draughts ; the cook's tormentors ; or the skipper's best china tea service—*anything* will do that is obnoxious to the interior of the human system—"

"Will this do?" I inquired, fishing out from the scuppers a heavy object of cylindrical shape, over which I had stumbled two or three times.

"Bless your dear little innocent heart ! yes," answered Markham, "it will do berry nicey nicey. Why, it's the very thing, greeny ; it's *cannister* ; in with it ; if this does not wake them up, call me a Dutchman, that's all. Now we're all ready. You let the skipper know what we're going to do, Chester ; and I'll stand by to fire directly he gives the word."

It was no very easy matter to secure the skipper's attention and make him understand what we proposed to do ; but I managed to accomplish it at last. As soon as he understood me, he hailed in a voice which rose clear and high above the din, "Is Mr. Sennitt there?"

"Ay ay, sir," came back in the well-known tones of the "first."

"We are going to try the effect of a charge of cannister," hailed

the skipper ; be good enough therefore to send your party into the fore rigging ; and you, my lads," to his own division, "stand by to rush aft behind the gun. Now !"

The first lieutenant's division sprang like cats into the fore rigging, and scuttled away for their lives half way up to the top ; while our party at the same instant made a dash aft and formed again in the rear of the gun. The movement was effected with such lightning like rapidity that the French could do nothing but stare at us open-mouthed.

Captain Brisac paused a single instant, to make sure that all our lads were out of the way of the shot ; and then he called upon the Frenchmen to surrender. Two or three flung down their arms ; but the rest, recovering from their momentary astonishment, started on a rush aft ; seeing which, the skipper sprang on one side and shouted "Fire !"

The charge took effect in the very thickest of the crowd, literally mowing the French down in heaps. At the same instant both parties of the "Scourges" renewed their attack, and this time their rush proved irresistible ; there was a momentary attempt at a stand, but our lads were no longer to be denied ; and after another very short but very fierce tussle the French threw down their weapons and cried for quarter. I, however, did not witness the final *dénouement* ; for, being hurried forward by the rest in the final rush, I found myself in the thick of the *mêlée* before I was quite prepared, and received a crushing blow on the head which felled me to the deck.

The prisoners were immediately secured ; and the bulk of the "Scourge's" crew shifted into the prize, a sufficient number only being left on board the brig to work her ; the wounded also were retained on board the frigate, where there was of course much better and more roomy accommodation for them ; our worthy medico shifting over, bag and baggage, to look after us. The damage to spars and rigging, which turned out to be unimportant in both ships, was soon made good ; and about 3 p.m. we made sail in company, shaping a course for Plymouth, where we arrived without mishap, late on the following evening.

We all received very great credit for what the papers were pleased to term our "dashing exploit ;" Captain Brisac being rewarded with post rank, while Mr. Sennitt was made a commander, and Mr. Clewline moved a step up the ratlines. We midshipmen also received our reward in the shape of "honourable mention ;" nor were the warrant-officers forgotten ; so that, what with promotion and prize-money, the "Scourges" were for a time the envy of

the entire navy. The war, however, had only just begun, or rather broken out afresh ; and everybody soon consoled themselves with the reflection that our luck might any day become their own. The prize proved to be the frigate " *L'Audacieuse*," of thirty-two guns and 230 men. She was a bran-new ship, and had come out of Brest on her first cruise only the day before we fell in with her. Her loss in the engagement amounted to forty-six killed and thirty-one wounded ; our own casualties amounting to fourteen killed and twenty wounded.

My own wound proved to be of a somewhat serious character, the blow having been inflicted with some heavy blunt instrument, and producing concussion of the brain ; I was, however, well looked after, and as soon as it was safe to move me, I was transferred to my own home, where I was nursed, petted, and made much of to my heart's content, until I was in the greatest danger of being spoiled, through the outrageous pampering of my self-love and vanity to which I was subjected.

Luckily, my great-uncle, Sir Peregrine condescended to interest himself in my welfare ; the moment, therefore, that I was fairly convalescent he swooped down on the vicarage, like a hawk upon a dove-cot, and carried me off with him to London, where he treated me to a week's cruise among the sights of the place. At the end of that time he drove with me one fine morning to the Admiralty, where I received my appointment to the "*Juno*" frigate, then fitting out at Portsmouth for the Mediterranean.

CHAPTER VII.

ON BOARD THE "JUNO."

MY short stay with my great-uncle, Sir Peregrine, proved to be a source of very great mutual satisfaction. He was a confirmed old bachelor, with a perfect horror of women and children, and by his persistent avoidance of both had gained for himself a character for moroseness and ill-temper. My mother, however, happened to be somewhat of a favourite with him—if a man possessed of such an unpromising character could be considered capable of so much warmth of feeling as to justify the expression—and having, for her sake, interested himself so far as to launch me in my profession, curiosity prompted him to keep me in view. He was greatly gratified to see my name appear in connexion with the capture of the "Sans Culotte;" and when the "Scourge" arrived in Plymouth so speedily with her second prize, and he heard of my being wounded, he posted down from town, determined to see Captain Brisac for himself, and ascertain by actual word of mouth how I had behaved. My kind skipper was so lavish with his praises that Sir Peregrine was in an ecstasy of delight; and from that time he became a different man; in consequence, I presume, of his having stumbled upon an object which excited within him a genuine interest. During the week of my stay with him in town he went everywhere with me, though his normal condition was that of martyrdom to gout; and on my receiving my appointment to the "Juno" he insisted on presenting me with an entire new rig-out from stem to stern; including a very fine and powerful telescope, the best sextant that could be bought for money, and one or two other matters of use in my profession. It had been intimated to me that, in consideration of my scarcely-healed wound, I need not join my ship until the last moment; but Sir Peregrine insisted on my going down at once, in order that I might not lose the chance which the fitting-out of the ship presented for increasing my knowledge of practical seamanship. "It is not that I am tired of your company, Ralph: do not

think that, my dear boy," he earnestly said ; " but you have now an opportunity which may perhaps never occur again for acquiring knowledge which is only to be gained in this way ; and it is a species of knowledge which may at any moment be of the utmost service to you. You will have to endure a week or two of discomfort, but that is a trifling matter compared with the lasting advantage which you will thereby obtain, and you will live to bless the day when your old uncle hurried you away from the pleasures of town to the discomforts of a ship passing through the riggers' hands. One word more, my boy. Your father cannot, I suppose, afford you a very liberal allowance of pocket-money ; I shall therefore supplement what he gives you by an allowance of a hundred a year out of my own pocket for the present, that being in my opinion quite as much as a lad of your age ought to spend. At the same time, understand me, if you should by any chance be in difficulties and require a further sum, you may freely draw on me ; provided of course that the difficulty is not of your own making, or of a dishonourable nature—but there, I do not think I need fear that of you, Ralph."

This was on the day previous to my starting for Portsmouth. It was arranged that I should go down by the coach ; Sir Peregrine at that time strongly disapproving of midshipmen driving down in private carriages, or even posting down to join their ships—" it would be quite time enough for that sort of thing when I had a ship of my own," he considered. We were both accordingly on the move early next morning, the old gentleman insisting on going with me to the coach-office, and seeing me fairly under way. While sitting at breakfast he handed me a letter for Captain Hood, my new skipper, who it appeared was an intimate friend of Sir Peregrine's—with the contents of which, however, I was not made acquainted. He ate very little, devoting the limited time at our disposal to the bestowal upon me of such good advice as his knowledge and experience of the service suggested—advice, the value and benefit of which, I had frequent after occasion to acknowledge. As we rose from the table, he opened a drawer in his secretary, and drew from it a sealed packet which he handed me, saying, " Slip this into your pocket, Ralph, and take care of it ; you may open it as soon as you like after you have joined your ship."

We drove to the coach-office in his own carriage, both of us being unusually silent on the way. For my own part, I candidly confess I felt the parting keenly, the dear old boy having completely won my heart by his altogether unexpected kindness ; and that organ was too full to permit of my then entering upon a light and trivial

conversation ; while false shame prevented my giving utterance to those feelings of reverence and regard which were agitating my breast. Just at the last moment Sir Peregrine brightened up again, seeming to have a lot of things to say which he had forgotten until then ; his last injunction, however, was, to stick by the ship until she should be "all ataunto ;" when I might apply with a clear conscience for leave to run home for a day, just to say good-bye previous to sailing.

Punctual to the second, our coach weighed, and stood out of the inn-yard in tow of four spanking bays, who rattled and jolted us over the stones at the rate of a good honest twelve knots an hour. The morning—early in June—was brilliantly fine ; the air delightfully warm and pleasant ; and as we left town behind us, mother earth, arrayed in delicate green, was looking her loveliest. The roads were in splendid condition, a smart thunder-shower or two during the previous night having thoroughly laid the dust, from which, therefore, we suffered no annoyance whatever. The rain had also washed every particle of dust from the hedges and the foliage of the trees, while it had refreshed the flowers in the villa and cottage-gardens which were scattered along the roadside, causing them to diffuse their sweets so bountifully that the atmosphere was heavy with perfume. The sun shone brilliantly ; the sky was a dazzling blue, flecked here and there with thin white fleecy clouds, the shadows of which, chasing each other over the landscape, imparted additional variety and charm to the scene. My depression of spirits soon yielded to the exhilarating influence of the day, and enabled me to enjoy thoroughly the drive down, the pleasure of which left upon my mind an agreeable impression, to which I often afterwards reverted with much satisfaction.

We reached Portsmouth about 3 p.m., and the coach stopping at the "George," I decided to stop there also, for that night at least ; I accordingly ordered dinner and a room ; and then strolled down to the harbour while the former was being got ready. As, however, I had no intention of reporting myself until the following day, I satisfied myself with ascertaining the whereabouts of my new ship, and taking a distant look at her ; after which I returned to the hotel, sat down to dinner, strolled as far as Southsea Common afterwards, and got back to the hotel and turned in about ten o'clock, determined to make a good long night of it, as I did not know when I should next have the opportunity of taking a whole night's undisturbed repose.

I was on board the "Juno" by nine o'clock the next morning, and reported myself to Mr. Annesley, the first lieutenant, who, early as

it was, already appeared to have been hard at work for some time.

“So you are come down to join?” he said, on my presenting myself. “I am very glad to see you, Mr. Chester; and I wish one or two more of the young gentlemen would follow your example. I am entirely alone here; not a soul to help me, and I am wanted in half-a-dozen places at once; so I shall really be glad of your assistance. I suppose you are prepared to commence duty at once? That’s right; then be good enough to take the launch, and go to the dockyard with this order for stores, and bring them off as quickly as possible. Just give them an overhaul, however, before taking them over, and satisfy yourself that they are good, sound, serviceable stuff. Those dockyard people have been trying to palm off upon me a lot of old junk, which must have been in store for the last twelve years at least. It is simply rotten, and would go like so much burnt thread in our first breeze of wind. Of course I refused to receive it, and have consumed a great deal of valuable time in getting sound stuff in place of it. Do not let them take you in; but *insist* on having everything of the best. Now go; get back as quickly as possible, and remember, I shall trust to you to do your very best for the ship.”

The boat was alongside, ready manned. I accordingly slipped down the side, and took command, with the feeling that I had suddenly become a personage of considerable importance.

On reaching the dockyard I found that I was only one of many who were there upon a similar errand to my own, and I had to await my proper turn. This occasioned a very serious loss of time; and when at length my turn came, the stuff which they offered me was so unmistakably bad, that even my comparative inexperience was not to be imposed upon, and I refused point-blank to accept it. I was thereupon told in a very off-hand way that I was quite at liberty to please myself as to whether I took or left it; but if I declined what was offered me, I should get nothing else; and without waiting for a reply, the storekeepers coolly left me, and began issuing to the midshipman whose turn came after mine. So thorough a snubbing as this clearly showed me that my own unaided efforts would be wholly insufficient to enable me to carry out my instructions to Mr. Annesley’s satisfaction, and I was debating within myself whether it would not be better to go on board again and report my non-success, when an officer who was passing stopped, eyed me sharply, and then held out his hand. It was my old skipper, Captain Brisac.

“Ah, Chester!” he exclaimed; “I am glad to see you, my lad—

glad too that you are on your pins once more, though you are looking very thin and pale about the gills. How is the wound ; pretty well healed up ? That's right ; but you ought not to be standing about in this hot sun. Are you here on duty ?"

I told him I was, mentioning at the same time the annoyance and inconvenience to which I had just been subjected.

"Where is the stuff they offered you ?" said he ; "I should like to have a look at it."

It was still lying on the wharf, close at hand, and I pointed it out to him. It was a quantity of hemp cordage, for use principally as standing-rigging. He turned it over, inspecting it carefully, laying open the strands here and there, and testing its quality both by sight and smell. Finally he turned upon one of the storekeepers who happened to be passing, and said,—

"Here, you sir, is this the best stuff you have in store ?"

The man hesitated and looked confused for a moment ; then put a bold face upon the matter, and replied, "Yes, sir, it is ; and rare good stuff it is, too ; it's the best that's made."

"Oh ! it is, is it ?" retorted the skipper. "Then I think it is about time that the Admiral's attention should be directed to the quality of the rigging upon which the safety of his Majesty's ships and the lives of their seamen depend. Just lay that coil aside for half an hour, if you please ; and if any one asks why you have done so, you may say it was at the request of Captain Brisac of the 'Audacious.'"

The man's visage lengthened out to a portentous extent. He saw he had brought his pigs to the wrong market for once, and he hurriedly exclaimed,—

"Beg pardon, sir, I'm very sorry the stuff is not to your liking ; but I think we *can* suit you, if you'll be so good as to step this way. Perhaps that other *is* rather old, but we've a lot of it in store, and we're bound to get rid of it somehow. Now here, sir, is some cordage that was only brought in fresh last week from the ropemaker's ; how'll that do, sir ?"

"Ah !" said the captain, examining it critically, "that is nearer the mark, decidedly. That ought to do for you, ought it not, Mr. Chester ?" turning to me.

"Perfectly well, sir," I replied. "I should be quite satisfied to be served with rope of that quality."

"Have you your order with you ?" asked Captain Brisac.

"Yes, sir," I replied ; "here it is."

"Then serve this young gentleman at once," he said authoritatively to the storekeeper ; "and be careful what you are about

with that old 'junk,' or you will be getting yourselves into serious trouble over it."

The storekeeper went away to get some assistance, and while he was gone, I availed myself of the opportunity to thank the skipper for the service he had just rendered me; after which he shook hands, saying he was in a great hurry: but if I could get leave that evening, he would be very happy if I would dine with him at the "George" at six, sharp. I thanked him duly for his kind invitation, but declined it, as I felt that my absence might possibly be a source of inconvenience to Mr. Annesley, which I explained.

"Quite right, Mr. Chester—quite right," returned he; "*never* allow pleasure to interfere with duty, if you wish to make headway in your profession. I shall perhaps be seeing Captain Hood—who is your new captain, I believe—this evening, and if so, I will put a spoke in your wheel for you. Good-bye!"

I was alongside the "Juno" with my cargo, just in time to get it hoisted out before the men went to dinner. Mr. Annesley met me at the gangway, as I climbed up the side, and asked me how I had got on, and what sort of stuff I had brought with me? I related my morning's adventures, and told him how Captain Brisac had helped me out of my difficulty with the dockyard storekeepers, winding up by calling his attention to the quality of the rope, which was just then being hoisted in.

"Capital!" he exclaimed; "nothing could be better. This is by far the best we have ever had served out to us; it is of first-rate quality, as every inch of rope served out to the navy should be. One can trust to this upon a pinch, without much fear of being disappointed. I am very much obliged to you, Mr. Chester, for the way in which you have executed your first duty on board here. I hope you will discharge all your duties equally well; and if you do, I feel sure we shall get on capitally together. I believe I have rather a reputation for strictness and severity, but no one who strives to do his duty well will find me either strict or severe. But are you the Mr. Chester who was with Captain Brisac in the 'Scourge' during his last cruise?"

I replied simply that I was.

"Upon my word, young gentleman, I am glad to hear it," said Mr. Annesley; "for I shall have the satisfaction of knowing that I have at least *one* midshipman of promise under me, whatever the rest may be. Now come down into the gunroom, and get something to eat; we are the only officers on board, so I thought it was not worth while to lay out a couple of tables. And while we are eating, you may as well give me an account of your action with the

French frigate, which, by the way, has, I see, been purchased into our own navy, and given to Captain Brisac."

I, of course, gladly accepted so kind an invitation ; and, as we ate, I described as graphically as I could every incident of the action, being frequently interrupted in the course of my narrative by questions which showed how keenly interested my interrogator was in every detail, particularly those relating to the handling of the two ships.

"Thank you, Mr. Chester," said Mr. Annesley, when I had finished ; "you have interested me much, and instructed me somewhat, also : one or two of the evolutions which you have so clearly described were very cleverly conceived, and as boldly carried out. I hope you will remember then, as most certainly I shall, it is knowledge of this kind which is so pre-eminently useful to a naval officer. Courage is of course an indispensable quality in every one who has to fight his Majesty's battles, whether on sea or land ; but the ability to manœuvre a ship in the heat of battle, so as to place her in the most advantageous situation with regard to her antagonist, is of fully equal importance ; and without the knowledge necessary to effect this, the most conspicuous courage, both of officers and crew, may become of no avail. Remember this, my lad, and lose no opportunity for perfecting yourself in the science of practical seamanship. Now let us go on deck again, as I hear the hands have turned to."

CHAPTER VIII.

NEW COMRADES.

WE were busy the whole of that afternoon, and up until nine o'clock in the evening, the riggers working "overtime," as the admiral was most anxious for us to go to sea at the earliest possible moment ; and Mr. Annesley, during the time, was all over the ship, taking me with him, and keenly watching the fitting of every spar and piece of rigging, being fully determined that every part of the work should be well and conscientiously done. I thought him unnecessarily particular over what then seemed to me to be trifles ; but the time came, when I perceived that no part of the rigging or equipment of a man-o'-war could be justly regarded as of trifling importance.

The work being pushed forward thus energetically, we made rapid progress ; and on the day fortnight from my joining the ship, she was all ataunto, with sails bent, stores of every kind, including powder and shot, on board, fully manned, and, in fact, quite ready for sea. Captain Hood had paid a couple of flying visits to the ship since I had joined her, but I had not seen him, as I happened on both occasions to be away at the dockyard ; but on the morning in question he came on board about eleven o'clock—his own gig having been sent on shore for him—mustered the hands and read his commission, made us a short speech, and then went on shore again, previously giving Mr. Annesley instructions to have everything ready for a start by three o'clock that afternoon. As soon, therefore, as the gig had left the ship's side, blue-peter was run up to the fore-royalmast-head, the fore-topsail was loosed, and everybody not actually belonging to the ship was ordered to be out of her in an hour's time. Then came the men's dinner-time, after which there was a general straightening and clearing up, fore and aft, the boats were hoisted in and secured, and finally the messenger was passed, and the anchor hove short-stay-a-peak.

And now, while all hands are supposed to be waiting with suppressed impatience for the appearance of the man who, for a time at least, was to exercise an almost omnipotent influence over the welfare and happiness of our little community, upon whose skill and courage our very lives were frequently to depend, and to whom we all looked up as our future leader in every deed of enterprise or daring, an opportunity occurs for me to say a descriptive word or two concerning the principal individuals with whom I found myself brought into association.

To commence at the top of the tree and work my way downwards—Captain Hood was, when he took command of the “Juno,” a man of about two-and-thirty years of age, of medium height and slight build, with a well-formed figure, and a face which, though by no means handsome, was strikingly agreeable to look at, chiefly because of its frank, easy, good-natured expression. He was always scrupulously well dressed, even in the vilest of weather; and there was just the faintest perceptible trace of Bond-street-dandyism in his air, conveying at first an impression of slight mental weakness—an impression, however, which was rapidly dispelled upon a more intimate acquaintance. His manner was quiet and imperturbable to an astonishing degree; and the more exciting the circumstances in which he was placed, the more calm and placid did his demeanour become. But those who flattered themselves that these characteristics indicated a lax disciplinarian found themselves grievously mistaken. He was strictness itself, in the matter both of discipline and etiquette; was as brave as a lion, a perfect seaman, with an eye which seemed intuitively to light at once and infallibly upon the slightest fault, and with a will of iron concealed beneath the placid suavity of his demeanour. His influence, though it could scarcely be said to be felt, was irresistible; and by its means he, in an incredibly short time, wrought the ship’s company into one of the smartest, if not absolutely *the* smartest, in the service.

Mr. Annesley, the first lieutenant, was in many respects a strong contrast to his superior. A tall, dark, square-built and muscular-looking man, with handsome features, dark, flashing eyes, and well-proportioned figure, every nerve of which seemed aquiver with superabundant vitality. His gesture, though restrained, was earnest and emphatic; his language in conversation, refined and eloquent; in carrying on the duty of the ship, short, sharp, and incisive. His manner to his superiors was quietly respectful, to his equals, somewhat distant, though without any trace of hauteur, and to his inferiors, gentle and sympathetic, or cold, stern, and

repellant, accordingly as they won his approval or incurred his displeasure. He, like the skipper, was also a prime seaman, with a dauntless courage which verged very closely upon recklessness, though it never was allowed to actually merge into that undesirable quality.

The second lieutenant, Mr. Michael Flinn, was a rollicking, good-tempered, good-natured young Irishman, careless and impulsive, as the generality of his countrymen are, always ready to perform a service for a friend, and still more ready to break the head of an enemy; a passably good officer afloat, but possessed with a perfect genius for getting into scrapes—and out of them again—on shore, with no consciousness whatever of his own dignity as one of his Majesty's officers, and ever ready to join heart and soul in any escapade of which he might happen to get an inkling. He was admirably adapted for such work as a cutting-out expedition, or a dash ashore to spike the guns of an outlying battery; but, when I first knew him, was utterly unfit for any service requiring discretion or tact in its execution.

The third lieutenant, the Honourable Edward Plantagenet Mortimer, was simply a useless, soft-headed dandy, who would as soon have dreamed of throwing himself overboard as of soiling his hands; there was no harm in him, he was good-natured enough, but he was emphatically *the* idler of the ship, never even making a pretence of performing any duty, but simply dawdling about the deck in kid gloves, with an eye-glass eternally screwed into his starboard top-light. His one idea was that he was a brilliant performer on the flute; and in his watch below he was incessantly rendering the lives of his neighbours a burden to them by the melancholy wailings which he evoked from that instrument. It was said that he could fight—when no other alternative was open to him—but the bustle and confusion, and, above all, the exertion, he considered such “a howwid boah,” that he always most carefully avoided those occasions for distinguishing himself, which other men are wont to seek with avidity. Why on earth he ever entered the navy was a puzzle which utterly defied solution.

The master, Mr. Rawlings, was a middle-aged man, quiet and unobtrusive in manner, and with very little to say upon any subject unconnected with his profession. There, however, he was unapproachable. He was simply perfect as a navigator, seemed to have been in and out of every harbour in the world, and was intimately acquainted with the position of every rock and shoal which guarded their approach, together with the distinctive features of every light, beacon, or buoy which announced their vicinity;

knew the direction and rates of the various currents, and could tell, without referring to his chart, the depths of water over bars and in channels, together with the bearings of the fairways in the latter, how wide they were, and the hour of high-water in them at the full and change of the moon ; in fact, his information on such matters appeared to be quite inexhaustible. He was unquestionably the ablest master in the entire British navy ; and one of the first anxieties of a captain, when in quest of a crew, was to get hold of "old Rawlings" as master.

We midshipmen were six in number ; four of my messmates being older, and one younger than myself. They were all good-tempered, agreeable lads, and in other respects were about on a par with the average run of midshipmen. The master's-mate, Mr. Percival, was berthed with us. He was a fine, gentlemanly, young fellow of about eighteen years of age, with great ability and intense application, bidding fair to achieve eventually a reputation equal to that of his chief, for whom he entertained a profound admiration.

And now, having introduced my fellow-officers, let me say what it is necessary to say respecting the ship.

The "Juno" was one of the old class of frigates, of which, however, she happened to be an extremely favourable specimen. She was very strong, being oak-built throughout, and copper fastened ; her timbers being of the most solid description, and exceptionally heavy scantling. She came to us with the unenviable reputation of being a poor sailer, though she was a very good model, particularly under water ; but Mr. Annesley paid her a visit while in the dry dock, and attentively studied her lines, having done which he determined to alter her trim altogether, putting her nine inches deeper down in the water aft, and reducing her ballast to the extent of twenty tons. The result answered his most sanguine expectations ; for while she still stood up well under her canvas, she was steadier in a sea-way, lighter and drier forward, paid off quicker in stays, and though still scarcely a clipper, her rate of sailing had considerably improved. Her accommodations were somewhat cramped, as compared with the newer and larger class of frigates ; but as far as I was concerned, coming into her from the little "Scourge," there seemed to be a positive superabundance of room. She mounted thirty-two long twelves, and mustered a crew of 190 men.

It had been my intention to act upon Sir Peregrine's suggestion, and ask for a day or two's leave to run home and see my friends once more, before finally quitting Old England upon a cruise of

unknown duration ; but we had been so excessively busy that I really had not the conscience to make such a request ; and now that the ship was finally at anchor, it appeared that we were to proceed to sea forthwith. I was therefore obliged to content myself with writing them a long letter, to which I put the finishing touches while we were waiting for the captain, Mr. Annesley having kept a shore-boat alongside to take ashore a few letters which he had hastily scribbled after the completion of the preparations for unmooring, and by which he kindly intimated that any one who had letters to send might send them.

At length, about 3.30 in the afternoon, the captain's gig was seen approaching the ship, the side was manned, and in a few minutes more Captain Hood stood upon his own quarter-deck.

"You may—ah—run my gig up to the davits, if you please, Mr. Annesley," said he, "and then we will—aw—weigh at once if—ah—you have everything ready."

"Quite ready, sir," replied the first luff, turning away to give the necessary orders. The gig was hoisted up and secured, the hands were sent aloft to loose the canvas, the topsails were sheeted home and mast-headed, the jib run up, and, simultaneously with this, the capstan-bars were shipped, one of the ship's boys mounted the capstan-head violin in hand, and to a merry air upon that instrument out stepped the men, the anchor was quickly run up to the bows, and with the last drain of the flood-tide the "*Juno*," under topsails and jib, with a light north-easterly air of wind, glided with a slow and stately movement out of the harbour, squaring away directly down through the Solent as soon as we had cleared the anchorage at Spithead, instead of going out round the island to the eastward, as was at that time usual with men-o'-war. This circumstance, trifling as it was, had a very exhilarating effect upon all hands, as it seemed to foreshadow that our skipper, notwithstanding his somewhat affected manner, had a habit of taking the shortest and most direct road when he had an object to achieve.

There were several ships lying at Spithead as we passed through, and it was observed that one of them—the "*Boston*," a frigate of about our own size—was just getting under way, her destination being the east coast of North America. Her skipper, Captain Courtenay, and ours were, it appeared, old friends, and having met that day at the Admirals' office, there had been a little good-natured banter between them as to the comparative sailing powers of the two ships, each being of course of opinion that his own ship could beat the other ; and it had been finally arranged that, as both frigates were to sail that day, there should be a friendly race down

Channel, the stake being the time-honoured one—a new hat. Accordingly, as soon as we had room, the “Juno” was rounded to with the main-topsail to the mast, to wait until the other ship should join us.

We were not detained very long. Hardly were we hove-to when the “Boston” was seen threading her way out through the fleet, and in a few minutes more she was close abreast of us, the “Juno” bearing up at the moment which would bring the bows of the two ships exactly level. Captain Courtenay appeared at the gangway as the “Boston” drew up alongside, and on our skipper showing himself, hailed “Juno ahoy ! are you ready ?”

“Ay, ay,” was the response, “we are—aw—quite ready.”

“Then—*off* !” shouted the “Boston’s” skipper, and at the word down came his topgallant sheets, the yards going up at the same moment, and the royal sheets fluttering down into their berths, as the yards rose to meet them ; then up went the royal yards to their respective mast-heads, the courses dropped heavily down, the staysails and flying-jib slid up their stays, and the driver was hauled out, the whole being done with the regularity and rapidity of a well-oiled and easy-working machine.

In the meantime our own hands had not been idle, and under Mr. Annesley’s able manipulation the “Juno” proved herself quite as smart as her antagonist in spreading her snowy pinions.

From that moment all was pleasant excitement on board as the two ships slid gently along side by side within hailing distance of each other. Speculation was rife, and the most diverse opinions as to the issue of the trial were expressed both on the quarter-deck and the forecastle. The “Boston” had the name of being a tolerably smart craft, but during the run down the Solent neither ship appeared able to claim any very decided advantage over the other, sometimes one and sometimes the other drawing a trifle ahead. On arriving off “Egypt” we were able to edge away a little, and then stunsails were set on the starboard side in both ships, still, however, without altering our relative positions.

As the sun declined toward the horizon the wind gradually dropped, finally dying away altogether, and leaving us absolutely motionless save for the drift of the ebb-tide, which still swept us along to the westward. It was a magnificent evening, the water, smooth as glass, reflecting on its glittering surface an absolutely unbroken picture of our stately consort, with every snowy sail, every spar and rope, as clearly shown as though she were reposing on the polished surface of a gigantic mirror. The western sky, glowing with tints of the clearest, palest amber melting into a deli-

cate rose, which merged in its turn imperceptibly into a clear, deep, transparent blue as the eye glanced from the horizon toward the zenith, was without a trace of cloud, and against this pure and exquisitely tinted background the outlines of Hurst Castle stood sharply out, the castle itself and the low spit of land on which it is built appearing of a deep, rich, powerful, purple hue, as though carved out of a giant amethyst, while the country further inland exhibited tints varying from the deepest olive—almost approaching black—through the richest greens, away to the most delicate of pearly greys in the remote distance. The Wight—about a quarter

of a mile distant on our port hand—presented a picture of exquisite and almost fairy-like beauty, with its wooded slopes, waving corn-fields, and grassy dells, aglow with the rich purply-golden haze of sunset, repeating their beauties in the waveless tide which washed its shores. As I stood gazing entranced upon the varied beauties of earth, sea, and sky, the scene gradually changed, a marvellous transformation was taking place, the sky tints deepened into a warmer, richer glow, the colours of the landscape slowly faded into sombre neutral, the castle stood out black as ebony against the dying flush in the sky, the water blushed crimson for a moment, then paled to a cold greyish purple as a faint breeze began to ruffle its surface, the azure of the sky became momentarily deeper and richer and more purple in tone, and presently, out from the clear cerulean depths started into view the planet Venus, beaming down upon us with a soft, silvery, lambent radiance, and tracing upon the bosom of the darkening wave a delicate thread of quivering liquid light.

“‘Who can paint like Nature?’” said a voice at my elbow, while an arm was slid quietly within my own, and I found myself joined by young Raleigh, a fellow mid—and by all accounts a scion of the same family as the renowned Sir Walter—“what mortal brush could hope to emulate the exquisite softness, delicacy, richness, and power of those tints which have just faded out of the picture before us, or what artist could adequately express the quiet, dreamy beauty of the present scene? Dame Nature has been kind in permitting what will probably be our last glimpse for some time to come of our native land, to be one of such surpassing loveliness. We are bound to a region the beauty of which has been for ages a favourite theme among poets, yet I fancy many of us will look with yearning fondness upon the cherished memory of the parting smile with which old England has bidden us a long good-night.”

“I am sure *I* shall, for one,” said I, “I have heard and read much of the beauties of the ‘sunny South,’ but I find it difficult to

imagine anything more exquisitely beautiful than many scenes which I have witnessed at home when Nature has been in her happier moods."

"Ah ! that is because you have never been away from home," remarked Raleigh. "I have already been up the Mediterranean once, and without for a moment attempting to decry the—"

"Hands, trim sails. In with the stunsails on the starboard side ; rig in and secure the booms, ease up the larboard braces, and take a small pull upon the starboard, rig out the booms on the port side and get the stunsails on her again. Be smart, my lads, or we shall have the frigate alongside presenting us with a full view of her stern all the way down Channel."

So spake the first lieutenant, the boatswain's whistle chirped, and in a moment the stillness on board gave place to a scene of bustle and animation. The breeze, after faintly ruffling the glassy surface of the water with an occasional cat's-paw, came softly stealing out from the E.S.E., and every sail was immediately trimmed with the most scrupulous nicety to woo the gentle zephyr. The lighter and more lofty sails first acknowledged its welcome presence, alternately swelling out and fluttering to the masts, like the gentle rise and fall of the breast of sleeping beauty, then they filled out steadily, the lower and heavier canvas also sullenly yielding to its influence ; a soft, musical, rippling sound arose beneath the frigate's bows, tiny whirlpools formed in the wake of the rudder and trailed away astern, the pressure of the spokes upon the helmsman's hand became firm and steady, a faint creak was occasionally heard aloft as the strain upon the spars increased, the sails "went to sleep," the sheets tautened out, the ripple under the bows grew louder and louder, until it emulated the rush of a mountain torrent, and the foam gathered round the cutwater, hissing along the side, and swirling far away in our wake, as the "Juno," yielding to the freshening breeze, swept out past the Needles, and hauled up a point or two for Ushant.

CHAPTER IX.

INTO A TRAP AND OUT AGAIN.

THE "Boston" was still in company at breakfast-time the following morning, but we had by that time contrived to leave her a good two miles astern, a feat which in view of that frigate's reputation occasioned general exultation to the "Junos," for, as little Summers sagely remarked at the breakfast-table, "what was the use of going to sea in a ship whose sailing powers were unequal to the task of taking her crew alongside an enemy?"

"Well, the old tub has not done badly, so far," observed young Smellie. "She turns out a good deal better than I had been led to expect. I met a mid who had formerly belonged to her, on the day that I came down to join, and he said that the fastest he had ever known her to go was six knots, and that it took her the length of a dog-watch to go about."

"Well, if she will stay at all, we shall not be so badly off as I was in the old 'Ajax,'" ejaculated Summers. "We were always obliged to *wear* her, and if we could get her round upon the other tack without running more than three miles to leeward we considered we had done pretty well."

"Is it your *habit* to exaggerate, or do you only indulge in it occasionally, young 'un?" quietly inquired Percival, the master's mate, looking up from a book he was devouring with his breakfast.

"Exaggerate? How do you mean?" returned Summers, flushing up very red in the face. "I thought it would be understood that I was only joking."

"And I have no doubt it *was* so understood," remarked Percival, "but if you are not above taking a bit of friendly advice, let me recommend you not to deviate a single hair's-breadth from the truth, even in joke; it is a dangerous practice, and as easy an introduction to deliberate, systematic lying as any with which I am acquainted. Now don't look so hurt, my boy, of course you meant no harm—

you had no intention to deceive us, it was merely a thoughtless speech, but be advised by me and avoid that particular species of thoughtlessness as you would the plague, nothing is much easier to acquire than a reputation for untruthfulness, and certainly nothing is more difficult to get rid of."

Poor little Summers hung down his head for a few moments, dreadfully abashed at this unexpected rebuke, then looking up, with the flush still on his face, he said, "Thank you, Mr. Percival. You hit me rather hard, but I believe you are right, I am afraid I *have* yielded rather too much to the bad habit of which you speak, but I don't think I shall be likely to do it again. And now, to change the subject, does anybody know exactly where we are bound?"

"There was a vague rumour floating about Portsmouth, a few days ago, that Lord Hood—by the way, I wonder if he is in any way related to our skipper!—is to take a fleet to Toulon, though for what purpose nobody seemed to know; I hope we shall not be ordered to join," said Smellie.

"I hope not!" remarked Percival. "I also heard the rumour to which you refer, and I fancy there must be some truth in it, for it went so far even as to specify by name several ships as having been selected to form part of the fleet, and I know that there has been a pretty general overhaul and refit going on with many of them. There is a large French fleet at this moment lying in Toulon harbour, and I am of opinion that the expedition—if such there is to be—is for the purpose of getting hold of a few of them. It is said that there are no less than thirty-four ships, many of them of large size, lying there ready for sea, while they have one seventy-four, and two forties—all very fine vessels—on the stocks and about ready for launching. If Lord Hood can take the pick of such a fleet as that, we should be able to lay up in ordinary the old 'Juno' and a few more like her. But I do not think we need distress ourselves much respecting the Toulon fleet. If Lord Hood wants any frigates, he will take them out with him. *Our* mission, I expect, will be to cruise up and down the Mediterranean, doing the best we can for ourselves; our skipper has, no doubt, influence enough to ensure that he shall not be hampered by being attached to blockading fleets, or anything of that kind, where you get a great deal of work and very little prize-money."

Percival's assumption turned out to be correct. We called at Gibraltar, and remained a couple of days, giving some of us, of whom I happened to be one—an opportunity of exploring this extraordinary fortress, from whence we went on to Malta, remained there a week, and were then ordered out to cruise. We were told

that the French had seventeen ships-of-war cruising in the Mediterranean, but we seemed to be altogether out of luck's way, for we never had the good fortune even to sight one, and, beyond picking up some half-a-dozen insignificant French traders, we did positively nothing for six entire months.

At length, about the middle of December, the ship requiring a slight refit, we bore up for Malta, arriving there on the 23rd of the month—just in time for the Christmas festivities. We of the cockpit contrived to get our full share of leave, and enjoyed ourselves immensely, but as nothing occurred particularly worthy of note, I shall not enter into details as to the pranks we played, and our several modes of seeking enjoyment."

On the 4th of January, 1794, we received orders to take on board 150 supernumeraries for the garrison at Toulon, the rumour of the proposed fleet under Lord Hood having in the meantime become an accomplished fact, and that gallant officer having accepted the surrender of the port from the Toulonese, in trust for Louis XVII. We received these supernumeraries on board early next morning, and sailed immediately after the completion of the embarkation.

It took us a week to make the passage, the wind being fair but light, and the weather beautiful during the whole time. On the fourth day out, poor old Rawlings, the master, complained of severe shooting pains in the head, accompanied by giddiness and nausea, and the next day found him confined to his berth in a high fever.

We arrived off the port at about 10 p.m. It was a beautiful night, the moon, just entering her second quarter, beamed softly down upon us from the cloudless, star-spangled sky, and a light air of wind from the southward just filled our sails and fanned us along at a rate of about four knots. When about five miles off, we hoisted lights for a pilot, the skipper being anxious to get in that night, so as to discharge the supernumeraries the first thing in the morning, the vessel being somewhat crowded. Three-quarters of an hour elapsed, during which we looked in vain for a boat coming off to us, when, having approached within a couple of miles of the entrance to the harbour, Captain Hood gave orders for the ship to be hove-to.

Another half-hour passed away, and still no sign of a pilot.

"If poor Rawlings had not been in the sick-bay—aw—we should have been snugly at anchor by this time," said the skipper to Mr. Annesley. "I'll be bound to say that the—aw—old fellow has been in and out of the place a dozen times at least, and he would have taken us in like a—ah—like a shot."

"Quite likely, sir," returned Mr. Annesley, with his telescope to his eye; "I think it would be difficult to name a port which he has *not* been into. It is unfortunate that he should be laid up just at this juncture. They must be very early birds in Toulon, or surely somebody would have made out our lights before this. And"—he lowered his telescope—"it is very queer, but I cannot make out the British fleet in there, surely we ought to see them from where we now are?"

"Not if they are in the inner harbour, which I—aw—suspect they are. The Italian brig which came in on the day we sailed was from Marseilles, and her master reported a succession of strong easterly winds hereabouts, which would naturally send the British fleet farther in; we shall find them there all right; where else could they be?" remarked the skipper.

"Very true, sir," observed the first lieutenant. "Shall we fill on her and heave about? I see no sign of a boat coming off."

"Yes, if you please," was the answer. "By-the-bye, I wonder if young Percival has ever been inside there; if he has, perhaps he could take us in."

"I scarcely expect he has ever seen the inside of the harbour, sir," said Mr. Annesley; "still, we can ask him. Shall I pass the word for him?"

"Yes, do," said the skipper. "I should like to get in to-night, if possible."

"Pass the word for—oh! here he is," said the first lieutenant, as Percival strolled aft from the fore-castle, whence he had been taking a good look at the harbour. "Mr. Percival, Captain Hood wishes to know if you have ever been into Toulon?"

"No, sir, I never have," replied Percival, addressing himself to the skipper direct; "but I have just been having a look at the place, and I feel sure I could take the ship in. Mr. Rawlings, on the first day that he was taken ill, brought out his chart, and showed me the way in, with all the marks and bearings of the fairway, and I have been able to make out every one of them quite distinctly. It is a fine, clear night, with little wind and no sea, so that if we *did* happen to touch anywhere we should do no harm, but I think I could safely promise to take her in without scouring her copper."

"Very well, then, Mr. Percival, I'll risk it. Take charge, sir, and do the best you can for us," said the skipper.

The main topsail was filled, and as soon as the ship had way enough on her, we hove about, and bore away for the harbour, with a hand in the fore-chains on each side, taking frequent casts of the lead, and Percival on the poop, conning the ship. As we drew in

towards the harbour, sail was shortened, and we crept in under topsails and jib only.

At length we safely entered the inner harbour, Percival's skill having proved fully equal to the occasion, and there, as had been expected, we found a number of ships lying snugly at anchor.

"Ah !" said the skipper, "here is the admiral, just as I expected. Do you see that bwig, Mr. Percival ?"

"Yes, sir," returned Percival, "I wanted to weather her, but we shall not do it, the wind is too light, and the tide too strong ; we must tack under his stern, as there is shoal water not far to leeward of where he is."

"Then, in that case, we'll give her a little more muslin," said Mr. Annesley. "Haul out the driver, and down with the fore tack and sheet ; look sharp, my lads ! Now, Mr. Percival, we are all ready."

We were now drawing up on the brig's starboard quarter, and almost within hailing distance. Captain Hood was preparing to hail the vessel, when a figure was seen on the taffrail of the stranger, and the next moment some indistinct words were hoarsely bellowed at us.

"*What* does he say ?" said the skipper, turning to the group of officers standing near.

"Couldn't exactly make out," said one. "Didn't hear very distinctly," said another. "I thought it sounded like French," said Percival.

"Oh !" said the skipper, "he is of course asking who we are. His Bwitanic Majesty's fwigate 'Juno,' from Malta, with supahnumewawies for the garrison," he added, roaring back between his hands at the motionless figure on board the brig.

"Viva !" was the reply, accompanied by the wave of a navy cap.

"He's Fwench," said the skipper ; "one of the fellows who has suwendered to our fleet. Can any of you gentlemen speak Fwench well enough to ask him which is the Bwedish admiral's ship ?"

There was no one, it appeared, with quite sufficient confidence in his knowledge of the French language to undertake this duty, so I stepped forward and, with becoming modesty, offered to obtain whatever information was required. Permission being given, I approached the side, and squeaked out, in the most manly tones at my command, the proposed inquiry.

The figure gesticulated violently, then stooped down to commune with three or four more, whose heads could now be seen just above

the taffrail ; finally he raised himself to an upright position, and shouted back, " Yesh, yesh ! "

" I'm afraid he did not understand you, Mr. Chester," said Mr. Annesley. " Try him again."

I did so, with even more confusing results than before.

" Ask him which is the Bwitsch fleet," suggested the skipper.

I put this question also, and the confusion appeared to become worse confounded ; some half-a-dozen replies coming back to us all jumbled up together, English and French words being so hopelessly intermixed, that it was utterly impossible to make head or tail of what they were saying.

We were by this time passing close under the brig's stern, and Percival was remarking to the first lieutenant that it was quite time to heave about, as he was sure we must be close upon the shoal, when the voice, which had hailed us first, shouted out for us to " Luff ! "

" Hard down with your helm ! " exclaimed Annesley ; " over with it, my man : tacks and sheets ! Ah ! we have cut it too fine," as with a gentle surge the frigate was brought up all standing on the shoal. " Away aloft, men ; clew up and haul down ; furl everything ! "

The topsail and jib halliards were let run, the canvas was clewed up, and in a minute or two more all was snugly stowed. The men were just in the act of laying in off the yards, when a little puff of wind coming down the harbour caught the frigate's bow, and to our great gratification paid her head round until her forefoot scraped off the bank. The order was at once given to let go the anchor ; the cable smoked out through the hawse-pipe, and the ship swung round, head to wind. We found, however, that her heel was still fast on the shoal, and the rudder immovable ; it was therefore determined, as the tide was on the turn, to hoist out the launch at once, and run away a kedge, in order to haul the ship off while the operation was still possible. Tackles were accordingly got up on the fore and main-yard-arms, and in less than five minutes the launch was in the water alongside.

" Where is Mr. Chester ? " said the first lieutenant, looking round. " Here, sir ! " I replied, emerging from the shadow of the bulwarks, where I had been taking a peep at things in general through an open port, from which I had observed, among other things, a six-oared gig pull from the brig, and make towards the town ; but foolishly I failed to report the circumstance, not at that moment attaching the slightest importance to it.

" Jump into the launch, Mr. Chester, and take charge," said

Mr. Annesley. "I want the kedge run away here, about two points on our port bow. You must not go farther to windward than that, or the tide will take our quarter, when we float, and drive us down on the brig. Now off you go, and be as smart as you can."

"Ay, ay, sir!" I replied, touching my cap, and away I scrambled down into the launch, where I found the kedge already stowed, with hawsers coiled down on top of it until the boat's stern was barely a couple of inches out of water.

"Shove off and give way, men!" I exclaimed, as my foot touched the thwart; the bowman shoved the boat's head off, the oars dropped into the phosphorescent water with a luminous splash, and we pulled down the harbour in the direction indicated by Mr. Annesley. We pulled steadily on until all the hawser in the boat had been paid out, when we let go the kedge, and hailing the frigate to "heave in," paddled back alongside.

While running out the kedge, I had observed a boat pulling toward the "Juno," and when we reached the frigate, we found this craft alongside. In the meantime the frigate had been hove off the bank without much difficulty, and the tide acting strongly on her hull the moment that she floated, she had drifted down to her kedge, which had been lifted, and the anchor having been tripped as she drifted over it was once more let go, just as we got alongside. The launch, not being required any farther at the moment, was passed astern, the crew being first ordered out of her. In order to regain the frigate's deck, it was necessary for us to pass over the boat alongside, which was lying in the wake of the gangway, and as we did so, I noticed that the eight men composing her crew were unmistakably French, and that, strange to say, they were fully armed. This struck me as so singular a circumstance, that I resolved to have a good look at the other individuals who had come off to us, and who were doubtless on deck in confabulation with the skipper. I found them, as I expected, on the quarter-deck, talking to the captain and the first lieutenant. There were two of them, apparently French officers; but the one who was talking spoke excellent English, and was, at the moment when I drew near the group, explaining to Captain Hood that, in compliance with a regulation of the port, and the commanding officer's orders, it would be necessary for the ship at once to proceed higher up the harbour to the quarantine ground, there to perform ten days' quarantine, and that he, the speaker, was deputed to pilot the ship then and there to her new berth.

"Phew!" ejaculated the skipper. "Quarantine, eh? with all these people on board; this is a pretty business, truly. I can't under-

stand it at all ; there is no sickness at present at Malta, and we carry a perfectly clean bill of health. Surely there must be a mistake somewhere. Before taking up a berth in this quarantine ground, I should like to communicate with Lord Hood. Can you point me out his ship, monsieur ? ”

“ You cannot see her from here, Monsieur le Capitaine,” replied the Frenchman. “ Besides, an interview with the British Admiral will avail you nothing ; he is doubtless retired by this time, and, even if he were not, he could not interfere ; he has no authority whatever in the present matter.”

I thought I detected a covert smile of derision passing over the speaker’s face as he said this, and I turned to see whether I could detect anything of the kind on that of his companion, but I found he had withdrawn to the gangway, apparently to call his people up out of the boat, for they were just coming up over the side, as I looked. In another moment he sauntered back, and rejoined the group from which he had so quietly slipped away.

“ Do you say that we cannot see the British flag-ship from here, sir ? ” inquired Mr. Annesley. “ Then pray where is she ? It seems to me that every ship in the harbour is within view from here ; yet, now I come to look, I cannot see a single British ship among them all. Does it not strike you, sir, that there is something rather peculiar about this business ? ” turning to the skipper.

I was sure I saw the two French officers start and glance quickly at each other at this remark ; and then, for the first time, I noticed that they wore tri-coloured cockades in their hats.

“ Why, those gentlemen have *national* cockades in their hats ! ” I exclaimed involuntarily.

“ By Jove ! you are right, young gentleman, they have ! ” ejaculated the skipper. “ What is the meaning of all this, monsieur ? Are you a Nationalist, or are you a Royalist in disguise ? And I beg that you will at once tell me the whereabouts of Lord Hood and his fleet. Unless I receive a distinct answer, I shall be forced to believe that treachery is meditated, and shall take the necessary precautionary steps forthwith.”

The Frenchmen looked in each other’s faces for an instant, and then the one who had called his boat’s crew on deck turned to the skipper and said, in French,—

“ Calm yourself, monsieur, I have the honour to inform you that you and your ship’s company are prisoners. But the English are a good people, and we will treat you all with the utmost kindness. The English admiral went away some time ago, and Toulon is now in the hands of the Nationalists.”

The expression of mingled horror and disgust which slowly overspread the features of the skipper and the first luff, like a summer cloud sailing slowly across the disc of the full moon, would have been irresistibly laughable under other circumstances, but as matters stood nobody felt the slightest inclination to laugh.

"*Prisoners!!*" ejaculated Mr. Annesley. He was apparently too full for further utterance, but he had already said quite enough. "We are prisoners!" flew from mouth to mouth, like wildfire, and in less than two minutes every man in the ship had become acquainted with our position. Every officer came crowding aft, to ascertain the truth of the startling rumour, and a more disgusted and dejected-looking group of mortals than we appeared, it would have been difficult to find.

The disagreeable announcement once made, the French officers hastened to place matters upon a more agreeable basis, exerting themselves to the utmost to get up a lively general conversation, and explaining how it was that we had so easily run into the trap. A very few words sufficed for this, the matter was so excessively simple.

It appeared, from the French officers' statement, that Lord Hood, after sustaining a long and harassing siege of nearly four months, had, on the night of the 18th of the previous December, been at length compelled to evacuate Toulon, he finding it utterly impossible to hold it any longer with the small force at his command—barely 17,000 men—against the overwhelming numbers of the besiegers, who mustered close upon 50,000.

But though unable to prevent the Republicans from obtaining possession of this important place, the British admiral resolved that it should pass into their hands, comparatively speaking, valueless. Immediately, therefore, that it was finally decided to retire from the place, he set on foot preparations to destroy the arsenal, magazines, &c., and such of the French ships as it was deemed inexpedient to take away with him; and though he was unable to carry out in their entirety the whole of his arrangements, it was pretty evident, from our informants' account, that the destruction actually effected was something enormous; the dockyard, with its various storehouses, the magazines, two powder-ships, and two 74-gun ships of war—the "*Héros*," and "*Thémistocle*"—being burnt.

It must have been a magnificent and awe-inspiring sight to witness these destructive operations, effected as they were during the darkness of the night. The conflagration of the stores, warehouses, and ships, the explosion of powder magazines and powder vessels

—the latter being *set on fire* by our lubberly allies, the Spaniards, instead of being scuttled, as had been arranged—and the incessant flash of the cannon and musketry—a hot conflict raging all the while between the British and the Republican forces—could not fail of being an awfully impressive sight ; and such it had evidently proved to our informants, who described the various scenes which they had witnessed on that memorable night with a very considerable amount of graphic power.

So interested were we all, for the moment, in this narration, that every one appeared to have completely forgotten our excessively unpleasant position, until it was recalled to our minds by an exclamation from our third lieutenant, the Honourable Edward Plantagenet Mortimer.

“Aw—excuse my intewupting this extwemely intewesting er—ah—conversation,” said he, in his usual dandified style, “but I should like to diwect your attention, Captain Hood, to the—ah—important fact that—ah—*the wind has changed*, and, if I may be allowed to expwess an opinion, I would say that if we could get the canvas upon the ship, I believe *we could fetch out of the harbour again.*”

The effect was electrical. The remark suggested such readiness of resource, such consummate seamanship, and such dashing courage on the part of the speaker, that, had it been uttered by Mr. Annesley even, we should probably have been somewhat surprised ; but emanating from the source it did, our astonishment simply beggars description. There was a dead silence for a moment, while we were ruminating upon and digesting the possibilities involved in the suggestion, and then, as it became apparent that a bold dash for freedom was still in our power, a ringing cheer burst out, fore and aft.

In an instant the skipper was himself again. “Silence, fore and aft !” he exclaimed ; “every sound you utter now may cost a man’s life. To your stations, men, and let every order be executed with the rapidity and—ah—silence of thought. Mr. Annesley, make sail, if you please. Gentlemen—” to the Frenchmen—“you will wegwet to learn that you have made a slight—ah—mistake. Instead of our being *your* prisoners, you are *ours*. And—er—as your countwymen, with their chawactewistic politeness, may possibly salute us as we pass the battewies, and as they may, in their anxiety to do so, omit to dwaw the shot from their guns, allow me to suggest that you wetire below. Mr. Carnegie—our lieutenant of mawines—has, I see, been thoughtful enough to pwovide an escort for you, and in his hands I have much pleasure in leaving you ; you will find

him a twuly delightful companion. Good evening, gentlemen, for the present."

At first the Frenchmen appeared unable to believe their own ears. Then, as they began to realize that we were actually about to attempt our escape, they rapidly threw themselves together, back to back, and began to handle their sabres menacingly. Carnegie, however, who upon hearing the Honourable Mortimer's remark had grasped the situation in an instant, had at once slipped off, returning in a very few minutes with some five-and-twenty fully-armed marines, and with these he promptly surrounded the chagrined Frenchmen, who found the way in which the "jollies" handled their half-pikes so little to their taste that they at length came to the conclusion that discretion was, in their case, the better part of valour, and sullenly suffered themselves to be conducted below.

In the meantime our lads had been anything but idle. With the activity of so many cats they had scuttled away aloft, laying out upon the yards, and casting off the gaskets in a style which must have done Mr. Annesley's heart good, and which, to a moral certainty, considerably astonished the Frenchmen on board the surrounding ships and in the batteries. There was no confusion whatever ; everything was done with as much method and precision as if we had been merely exercising the crew ; but, on the other hand, not one second of precious time was wasted, and it really was a pretty sight to see all the canvas falling simultaneously from the yards, the topsail sheets instantly going home into their places, and the three topsail-yards directly afterwards soaring away up to the mastheads. Then home came the topgallant sheets, and up went the yards, the royals following, and being set literally before the topgallant halliards were belayed. The fore-and-aft canvas was at the same time set, and the moment that the royals were at the mast-heads the yards were braced for casting the ship. The carpenter and one of his mates were stationed at the hawse-pipe, armed with their keenest axes, and stood ready to strike directly the word was given. In three minutes from the time that the order had been given to make sail, Mr. Annesley turned to the skipper and said, with the utmost composure, "All ready, sir."

"Where is Mr. Percival?" inquired Captain Hood.

"Here, sir!" replied Percival, stepping forward and touching his cap.

"Take charge, sir, if you please," said the skipper. "And do not forget that the safety of the frigate, and our chances of escape from a long captivity are absolutely in your hands. If we touch

the ground and hang for five minutes, we shall be simply blown out of the water."

"I will do my best, sir," quietly replied Percival, taking up a convenient position for conning the ship.

"I feel sure you will, sir," returned the skipper. "Say when we shall cut."

"At once, sir, if you please," was the reply.

"Cut, and cut with a will!" said Mr. Annesley. Three or four quick strokes were heard, the frigate's head paid slowly off until her sails filled, when the head-yards were swung, the fore-and-main tacks were boarded, the sheets hauled aft, and every sail trimmed as if for a sailing-match.

The fact that our movements were closely watched became apparent the moment that the hands appeared in the rigging to loose the sails, a very perceptible stir taking place on board the brig, while lights rapidly made their appearance in the several batteries.

"We are about to have a warm quarter of an hour," remarked the skipper, who had been keenly noting these sinister indications, while the first luff was getting the ship under weigh. "Let the crew go to quarters at once, if you please, Mr. Annesley."

"Ay, ay, sir!" was the reply. "If we only had a little more wind—and there it comes—blow, good breezes, blow! I believe we shall scrape clear, after all. Beat to quarters!"

A sharp roll of the drum immediately broke in upon the quietude of the night; there was a momentary bustle—but only momentary the men having already gone to quarters, as a matter of course—and then all was profound silence once more on board, save for a gentle rippling sound beneath the bows and along the sides, and the occasional creak of a block aloft.

"Say when you wish to tack, Mr. Percival," said the first luff, stationing himself alongside the master's mate.

"Not yet, sir," said Percival; "the wind is favouring us a little just now—there it freshens a trifle, and she looks up better than ever. Keep her a good clean full, quarter-master, and let her go through the water. I wish there was not quite so much tide, though it *is* in our favour; it is setting us bodily down towards the shoal water. Keep the lead going, there, in the fore chains. We should do none the worse, sir, if the Frenchmen's boat were cut adrift."

"Cut it adrift at once," said the skipper, who was standing close by; "cut it adrift at once, and the launch as well; we cannot afford to have so much as a rope's end dragging alongside just now. Ah! I have been expecting that," as the brig before

referred to, having got a spring upon her cable, and brought her broadside to bear, opened fire upon us. "Never mind," continued the skipper, "we shall soon be out of harm's way, as far as she is concerned; it is the fire of the battewies I dwead most; they, no doubt, mount heavy metal, and if the guns are well served a single broadside will unwig us. This is an ugly looking fellow here, on our starboard bow; they evidently mean mischief there, by the number of lights they show. Let the starboard broadside guns be twained for the thwee ports where we see the most light, Mr. Annesley, and let each gun be fired, as it is bwrought to bear."

At this juncture another broadside from the brig whistled overhead, making a few eyelet-holes in our canvas and cutting one or two unimportant ropes; and immediately afterwards a shot, quickly followed by another, and yet another, came plunging at us from the fort.

The guns were evidently pointed with the intention of bringing down our spars, but luckily we again escaped without any damage worth speaking of. Matters were beginning to assume a very lively aspect for us; for as we glided down the harbour we could see the lights glancing in battery after battery, on each side of us, until every one of them was lighted up.

Still, on swept the frigate, silent as a ghostly ship, and without a light of any kind visible on board her, the battle-lanterns being every one carefully masked, the men standing silent and motionless as statues at their guns; even the remarks interchanged between the officers were expressed in low murmurs only loud enough to reach the ear for which they were intended, the oppressive silence being intensified rather than broken by an occasional "Luff! luff, you may, quarter-master," from Percival.

Presently, *crash* came a simultaneous discharge of five heavy guns from the battery on our starboard hand, and four from another battery on the opposite shore; the shot hissed overhead, there was a dull crushing thud or two aloft, and a little rattling shower on deck as ropes and splinters came clattering down. Some of our spars had evidently been badly wounded, and the carpenter and his mates were sent aloft to ascertain the extent of the damage. While they were ascending the rigging, *bang* went our foremost gun on the starboard side, followed by the remainder of the broadside; and the moon happening to shine full upon the stone walls of the fort which had just opened upon us, we saw, as the smoke drove astern, a little cloud of dust rise about one of the embrasures, a ragged patch of chipped and broken stone appeared

to start out upon the wall, and faintly borne down to us on the heavy night-wind came the sound of shrieks and yells of agony. It was perfectly evident that our shot had told with severe effect.

As though the discharge of our broadside had been the pre-concerted signal for a general cannonade, every battery within range on each side of the harbour now opened fire upon us, some of them, however, fortunately for us, being unable to bring more than a single gun to bear. Had the guns on shore been served with only ordinary skill, we should undoubtedly have been destroyed ; as it was, though the shot flew over and over us thick as hail, lashing the sea into foam all round us, shredding our sails to ribbons, cutting up very badly our standing and running rigging, bringing down our main-topgallant-mast, and severely wounding several of our other spars, we still glided safely on, our hull uninjured, and not a man hurt. Orders were now sent down for the guns on the main-deck to play upon every battery upon which they could be brought to bear, and for each gun to be laid with the greatest possible accuracy, precision rather than rapidity of fire being the skipper's object. An irregular fire from both broadsides accordingly now commenced ; and that it was not altogether without effect was demonstrated by the speedy silencing of two or three out of the many guns now playing upon us ; but, as our object was to escape with the least possible delay, Captain Hood would not allow the frigate's course to be altered by so much as one single hair's breadth in order to bring our guns more directly to bear upon either of the batteries.

"We shall have to make a short board presently, sir," said Percival to the skipper, as we drew down to within half a mile of the harbour entrance ; "there is shoal water directly ahead of us now, and we have broken off a couple of points within the last ten minutes. Shall we heave about at once, or go on as far as we can ? If we stand on much farther, we shall be exposed to the fire of yonder battery, which seems to be preparing a warm reception for us."

"Go about at once, sir, by all means," replied the skipper. "We have got off wonderfully well so far ; we will certainly not run any unnecessary risks now. Ready about, Mr. Annesley."

"Ay, ay, sir. Ready about !" repeated the first lieutenant. The men went to their several stations, the coiled-up braces, &c., were thrown off the belaying-pins, and all was ready for the execution of the proposed manœuvre.

"Down with your helm, quarter-master," was the next order. The tiller-ropes creaked as the wheel was rapidly spun round by

the brawny and dexterous arms of the quarter-master, and the ship slowly luffed to the wind.

"Hold on of all!" suddenly exclaimed Percival. Then, turning to the skipper, he continued, "The wind is favouring us again, sir; she is still clean full; and if the breeze keeps as it is for ten minutes more, we shall fetch out clear of everything."

"So much the better," remarked the skipper. "Our present course, however, will take us unpleasantly close to that battery; so"—looking round until his eye lighted on me—"be so good as to step down to the main-deck, Mr. Chester, and request Mr. Flinn to treble-shot his larboard broadside and pour it into that battery as we pass. Perhaps we may be a second or so beforehand with them; and if so, a well-directed broadside on our part may stop their fire altogether."

I soon found Mr. Flinn; and, having delivered my message, returned at once to the quarter-deck, anxious to see how we should fare with this last battery, which, to judge by appearances, was the most formidable of them all. As I emerged through the hatchway. Percival gave the word to the helmsman to keep away a couple of points, the frigate having just shaved past the most prominent part of the shoal. This brought the battery directly abreast of us, and less than a quarter of a mile distant; and I was waiting for the concussion of our broadside, which I momentarily expected would be poured into it, when the whole face of the fort blazed out into a line of fire; there was a deafening roar, a loud whirring sound in the air, a crashing among our spars aloft, two distinct and heavy thuds, telling that some of the shot had struck our hull; and then, as the mizen-topmast fell over the side, the fore-top-gallant-mast following—the topmast-head being shot away—our whole broadside rang out at once, and we distinctly heard the crushing sound of the shot as it struck the masonry.

The breeze had in the meantime freshened somewhat, and notwithstanding our crippled condition, we were slipping through the water at the rate of about five knots. We had by this time run the gauntlet of all the batteries on each side of the haven, and we considered that we had had the worst that we were to have; our spirits accordingly began to rise, as the prospect of escape became more hopeful. The skipper expected that we should have to sustain a couple more broadsides from the battery with which we had just exchanged compliments, after which, if we escaped further serious damage, we might consider ourselves safe. Every eye—excepting perhaps Percival's and the helmsman's—was accordingly directed anxiously to the dark frowning mass which stood out

indistinctly from the dark background of land, and which every moment grew more and more vague and undefined, expecting to see the lurid line of fire blaze out from the darkness once more. But minute after minute passed by, the frigate drawing out from the land all the while, and the breeze freshening with every fathom of additional distance, until nothing could be discerned, even with the aid of our night glasses, but the feeble glimmer of the lanterns showing through the port-holes ; and presently these abruptly disappeared : the battery was shut in by a projecting point of land and *we had escaped*.

The moment that this agreeable fact became known the crew with one accord gave three hearty cheers, the skipper himself for the nonce laying aside his usual *sang-froid* and leading off. The guns were secured, a liberal allowance of grog served out, and then, late as it was—about half an hour after midnight—all hands turned-to to repair damages.





CHAPTER X.

AN IMPORTANT MISSION.



NCE fairly at sea and out of reach of the enemy's shot, we had time to take a look at ourselves and realize the extent of our damages. When passing over the same ground a few hours before, the "Juno" presented as pretty a picture as a nautical connoisseur could wish to see, with her hull recently painted, every spar in its place, and adjusted there to a nicety, her rigging in perfect order, and her white sails—the new look just worn off them, and barely stretched into their proper shape—without a blemish or fault to mar their perfect appearance. *Now*, she passed out to sea with her fore and main topgallant-masts and mizen-topmast hanging over the side, the fore-topsail-yard down on the cap, the spanker-boom shot away in the jaws, the flying-jib stay and halliards cut through and the sail towing alongside, her canvas riddled with shot-holes, ends and bights of ropes streaming out in the wind everywhere aloft, and two 36-pound shot in her side. Luckily, however, our casualties ended here ; for, notwithstanding the hail-storm of shot through which we had passed, not a man on board was hurt.

We were busy the remainder of that night, and a good part of the following day, making good the damages sustained. By evening, however, we were all at aunto once more ; and as soon as the work was finished, Captain Hood mustered the hands and made them a speech, thanking them, both officers and men, for the courage and determination with which all had co-operated with him in effecting the escape of the ship from an enemy's port, wherein she actually lay aground surrounded by armed ships, and with numerous heavily armed batteries opposing our departure. Percival was specially referred to, his skill in piloting the ship in and out again being dwelt upon in highly commendatory terms ; and then—the skipper being a rare hand at turning out a neat speech and rounding it off with a compliment—the men were

told that, having behaved so exceptionally well, their officers would now have no hesitation about engaging in any enterprise, however hazardous or hopeless it might appear, confident that the men they led would support them as long as they had strength to stand.

At the close of this speech the men, as in duty bound, gave three cheers, the hammocks were piped down, and life on board the "Juno" resumed once more its normal conditions.

The first question which suggested itself to the skipper, after getting his ship once more into fighting order, naturally was what was to be done with the supernumeraries which we had on board. His instructions, it appeared, made no provision whatever for the possibility of such a *contretemps* as had befallen us, and he was, in consequence, quite at a loss what to do. Finally, after talking the affair over with Mr. Annesley, he resolved to take them back to Malta, and a course was accordingly shaped for that island. We accomplished the passage in five days, and landed the men, who were glad enough to plant their feet on mother earth once more, after knocking about in their confined quarters for nearly a fortnight.

During our absence, information of the evacuation of Toulon by Lord Hood had reached the island, and it was taken quite for granted that, going to the place in ignorance of this important fact, as we were, we should inevitably fall into some trap and be made prisoners; when therefore we put in an appearance once more, and the details of our escape were made known, we immediately became the object of unbounded curiosity and admiration. Hundreds flocked to see the ship (many of them being intensely disappointed at the almost entire absence of visible indications of the peril through which she had passed), and officers and men alike were pointed out and looked after in the streets, until we ran the greatest risk of becoming inordinately vain of our exploit. The admiration of the islanders did not end here, however; for it being deemed advisable to place the frigate in dry dock to examine her bottom and smooth her copper, after having touched the ground, as well as to make good a few defects which were beyond our own unaided powers, we were balled, *fêted*, picniced, and generally made much of for three days by the excitable and pleasure-loving inhabitants, at the end of which time, our repairs being completed, we were hurried away to sea with sealed orders, to be opened off Cape Spartivento.

We arrived off this headland on the 22nd of January, and Captain Hood then learned that we were to remain on the spot until the evening of the 24th, when, if no farther instructions reached him,

he was to open a sealed paper which he found enclosed with his orders. The ship was accordingly hove-to and placed under reefed topsails, a private signal was hoisted at the main-royalmast-head, and in order that the time might not be absolutely wasted, the crew were put through a special course of drill.

A sharp look-out was maintained, in order that there might be no possibility of our being passed unobserved by any craft bearing later instructions ; but though we saw plenty of feluccas passing along the coast, the only craft which came at all near us was a magnificent 40-gun frigate, which hoisted French colours and bore down towards us on our showing our ensign ; but having approached within four miles and lying hove-to for half an hour, she resumed her original course to the northward, leaving us in a most unchristian frame of mind towards the admiral, whose orders tied us to the spot, and prevented our accepting the challenge she had given. We at first cherished the hope that if we did not go out to her, she would come down and attack us, but such a slice of good luck was not just then to fall to our lot.

The stipulated period of our stay off Cape Spartivento having at length expired, Captain Hood broke open the packet to which reference has already been made, and having acquainted himself with the farther instructions therein contained, orders were forthwith issued to make sail to the northward and westward.

We had a fine breeze from the eastward, to which we showed a heavy press of canvas ; the frigate accordingly made short miles of the trip along the Sardinian coast, and on the following evening arrived off the Gulf of Ajaccio in Corsica, the coast-line being about twenty miles distant, and consequently "hull-down ;" the mountain-chain, however, which forms as it were the backbone of Corsica, was distinctly visible, lighted up as it was by the gorgeous tints of sunset. Sail was now shortened to topsails, and the frigate hove-to.

While all hands were wondering more or less what the next move would be, I was sent for by the skipper to go to him in his cabin. On arriving there, I found him and Mr. Annesley seated at the cabin table with a decanter of port standing between them, glasses of the same at their elbows, and a large map spread out in the full light of the cabin lamp, which had just been lighted ; the table being further littered with a large number of official-looking documents.

As I entered the cabin, Captain Hood raised his eyes from the map, over which both officers had been earnestly poring, and said,—

“ Oh ! come in, Mr. Chester, and bring yourself to an anchor. Atkins ! a wine-glass for Mr. Chester. There, help yourself, young gentleman.”

I poured out a glass of the port, wondering, as I sipped it, wherever the skipper managed to pick up so very excellent a wine ; and when the steward had retired, closing the door after him, Captain Hood looked across the table at me, and said,—

“ Mr. Chester, I have been greatly gratified at the continued good reports which Mr. Annesley makes of your conduct. He speaks very highly of your intelligence, perseverance, zeal, and courage, and I—ah—may say that—er—I have myself noted from time to time your possession of those—ah—desirable characteristics. Partly on this account, and partly because of your—ah—intimate knowledge of the French language, I have selected you for the performance of a service in which all the qualities I have mentioned are—er—conspicuously necessary. You will understand this more clearly when I explain that the service consists in the safe conveyance of certain very important documents to the hands of a Corsican gentleman on shore yonder, in the face of unknown but possibly serious difficulties from the numerous French troops occupying the island, and into whose hands the documents in question must by no means be allowed to fall. I should hesitate very strongly about entrusting one so young with a mission so delicate but for Mr. Annesley’s positive assurance that I may safely do so. Now, what say you ? are you willing to undertake the service ? ”

To say that I *jumped* at the offer would but feebly express the eagerness with which I answered in the affirmative. Here was one of those chances for distinguishing myself for which I had so ardently longed, and here too was the prospect of at least temporary freedom from the restraints of discipline and the monotony of shipboard, to say nothing of the possibilities of excitement and adventure involved in the performance of a secret service in the enemy’s country. It was with the utmost difficulty I controlled my excitement sufficiently to listen to the skipper’s instructions, and to absorb and master the information necessary to the successful conduct of the enterprise.

The map spread upon the table was a map of Corsica drawn to a large scale, and showing every road, stream, mountain-path, wood, chateau—indeed I might almost say *every house* on the island ; and upon it was marked in red ink the various French posts, as far as they could be ascertained, while crosses in blue ink indicated the posts of the insurgent Corsicans. Captain Hood produced also a skeleton map of the island drawn to a very small scale, containing

only such information as was necessary for my guidance ; and during the delivery of his instructions frequent reference was made to both these maps, as well as to a manuscript book of what would be called " sailing directions " if it referred to a journey by water instead of by land, and from which I made brief notes from time to time, by way of memory-refreshers, in a tiny book with which Captain Hood furnished me. The skipper kept me with him for more than two hours—in fact until he had satisfied himself that I not only thoroughly understood what was required of me—which was very simple, being merely to find an individual, who was to be identified by certain pre-arranged tokens, and to deliver my despatches, or whatever they were, into his hands—but also that I had mastered every scrap of information which he was able to give me. When at length he found that I was fully " posted up," he dismissed me to make my preparations, cautioning me to dress in plain clothes, and to exercise the utmost care that I carried no document or article of any description with me whereby I might be identified as belonging to the English service, " otherwise," he grimly observed, " they will hang you without hesitation on the nearest tree. One thing more," he continued, as I rose to leave the cabin ; " as soon as you are landed, we shall proceed in search of Commodore Linzee's squadron, which we are ordered to join ; it is therefore quite uncertain when you may have an opportunity to return to the ship ; but as I have reason to believe we shall operate somewhere at the northern end of the island, as soon as you have accomplished your mission you had better make for either Calvi or Bastia, and when you can learn our actual whereabouts, seize the first opportunity which offers to rejoin. Here," handing me a packet, " is a sufficient amount of Fwench money to cawwy you handsomely thwough the business if no hitch occurs ; if it does, you must exercise your ingenuity to get yourself out of the difficulty. Now go away and get weady, and—ah—er—I heartily wish you success. Good-bye."

He offered me his hand—with just the slightest perceptible touch of stiffness in the gesture—which I seized and shook so heartily in the excitement of the moment as to cause him to raise his eyebrows in astonishment at my audacity. The next minute I was on deck once more, with the cool night-air fanning my flushed and burning cheeks, while it urged the frigate through the water at a rate of about seven knots toward the lights of Ajaccio, which glimmered on the horizon broad on our starboard bow.



CHAPTER XI.

THE ROAD TO AJACCIO.

MY descent to the midshipmen's berth for the purpose of making my few preparations was the signal for a general fusilade of questions from my inquisitive messmates as to the why and wherefore of my summons to the cabin, and great was the disgust which each felt that *he* had been passed over in favour of so unimportant a personage as myself. It was quite true that no one of them could claim to possess more than the merest rudimentary knowledge of French, yet each was prepared with what he considered an amply sufficient reason why he should have been specially selected for the service.

Mr. Midshipman Raleigh maintained that the duty was his by right, in virtue of his seniority ; and as to his ignorance of French, that was a mere trifle which *he* was quite satisfied would never have proved the slightest impediment to his success.

Little Percy Neville—a blue-eyed, golden-haired lad whom not even a blind man could well have mistaken for anything else than pure Anglo-Saxon—flattered himself that “the cut of his jib” was so eminently French as to deceive even the most practised eye ; while as to language, he could say *bon jour* or *bon soir*, and bow with the air of a born Parisian. These accomplishments were, he considered, amply sufficient to ensure his perfect safety while travelling, and to enable him triumphantly to accomplish his mission—if need were—in the full light of day, and under the very eyes of unsuspecting thousands.

Mr. Robert Summers was of opinion that that was all very well, and *might* do ; but if *he* had been entrusted with the duty, his first step would have been to proceed straight to Ajaccio, and there disburse some of the French coin in the acquisition of an organ and monkey, together with a full suit of picturesque Italian rags, all of which *he* knew would be easily procurable ; and provided with these, *he* would have felt prepared to face with the most unruffled nonchalance

the severest scrutiny of a whole regiment of French detectives—the acuteness of the mere soldiery he considered would have proved simply beneath his contempt.

Each of the other “young gentlemen” was equally ready to suggest an infallible scheme for baffling the vigilance of the enemy; and if the conversation had no other value, it at least served to amuse me while making my preparations for the expedition.

The money was mostly paper, and my first act was to carefully secrete it among the lining of the suit of “long togs” which I had decided to bend for my cruise ashore. I then packed a small leather bag with a shirt or two, selecting such as—I say it with shame—I had been too lazy to mark, a pair of socks, a brush and comb, a piece of soap—afterwards rejected upon the urgent representation of Bob Summers that the French *never* used soap, much less carried it about with them—and a few other necessities of trifling bulk, together with a small sketch-book and a box of colours; my idea being that the best way to elude inconvenient attention was by neither courting nor avoiding it, and my intention was to endeavour to pass as a young German artist student on a sketching tour, a sufficient knowledge of German and drawing for such a purpose being among my accomplishments. Lastly, I summoned up courage to ask of Mr. Annesley the loan of a pair of beautiful little pocket-pistols which I had frequently noticed when I had had occasion to go to his cabin.

This completed my equipment, and by the time that I was ready and once more on deck the frigate had approached to within some six miles of the land, and was in the act of heaving-to, it being considered that we were now as close in as it was prudent to go.

When I stepped on deck, Captain Hood was on the quarter-deck, talking to Mr. Annesley and Mr. Rawlings, the master—who was so far convalescent as to be able once more to resume the duties of his post—and as I approached the group, I heard the skipper remark, “And so you know Ajaccio well, Mr. Rawlings?”

“Ay, ay, sir,” responded the master, “almost as well as I know Portsmouth Harbour; I have been in there twice, and can put the ship wherever you want her, within a fathom or so, dark as it is.”

“Is there not a ruin of some sort close to the water’s edge, about six miles to the southward of the town?”

“There is, sir; an old chapel I believe it is. The ground rises rather steeply from the water’s edge there, and is covered with

trees. The ruin stands just on the edge of an overhanging bank, about thirty feet above high-water mark ; and the beach below is—or was when I saw it last—littered with stones and blocks of masonry which have fallen from the building.”

“Would it be safe to attempt a landing there with a boat on such a night as this?” asked the skipper.

“Couldn’t find a safer spot to land on anywhere in the island,” confidently replied Rawlings. “The beach is all shingle, and pretty steep, bottom quite clear of rocks, and not a ripple there with the wind this way. Run the boat’s nose up high and dry, and jump out on to the beach without wetting your feet. Then, as to the chance of being discovered, the place is dreadful lonesome, specially at night—they do say as it’s ha’nted, though I can’t vouch for the truth of the story ; but I *do* know this much, that the last time I was ashore there, I took a stroll out as far as the ruin towards nightfall, and they told me as I don’t know what would happen if I went there ; nobody ever went anear the place at nightfall, so they said.”

“And *did* anything happen?” inquired Mr. Annesley.

“Lord bless you ! no, sir. I enjoyed the walk amazingly ; sat and smoked my pipe among the ruins, and watched the sun go down ; stayed there till the moon rose, and then walked back again to the town, and never saw a soul within a mile of the spot all the while I was there.”

“Does not the high road to Ajaccio pass close by the ruin?” inquired the skipper.

“Within a cable’s length of it,” replied Rawlings. “And when once you’re in the road, turn to the left, and it’s all plain sailing for the rest of the way right into the town. There’s only one turning in the road, and that’s just after you leave the ruin ; but it is only a narrow road ; it turns to the right, and leads off somewhere among the hills.”

“Just so,” remarked the skipper in a tone of great satisfaction. “What Rawlings says agrees most accurately with the information supplied to us, you see,” he continued, addressing Mr. Annesley ; “so I think if young Chester only follows out his instructions with ordinary care, he should have no difficulty in finding the place to which he is sent.”

“None whatever, I should imagine,” returned Mr. Annesley. “He is very young, I admit, to be entrusted with such important documents, but on that very account he is all the less likely to attract attention ; and I have the utmost faith in his readiness of resource, which I believe is quite equal to the task of keeping him

clear of all difficulty. Do you still feel quite confident of success?" he asked, turning to me.

"Perhaps I ought not to say quite so much as that, sir," I replied, "but I feel no nervousness whatever, and I will do all I possibly can to succeed."

"That is quite sufficient," said the skipper. "And now it is time you were off. Let them man my gig, the crew taking their side-arms with them. And as you know the place so well, Mr. Rawlings, I will ask you to take command of the expedition, and kindly put Mr. Chester fairly in the main road to Ajaccio. Remember, Mr. Chester—the first turning to the right."

"Ay, ay, sir," I replied. A few brief and final instructions were given me; the skipper once more shook hands, and wished me success, Mr. Annesley following suit; and then, the gig being by that time manned and in the water, I slipped down the side and seated myself in the stern-sheets alongside old Rawlings, the bowman shoved off, and the crew, dropping their oars with a splash into the water and dashing it into liquid fire, stretched out to their work, sending the light boat dancing over the wavelets toward the distant shore, and leaving far astern a luminous wake, with six small whirlpools of fire eddying on each side of it.

We pulled steadily on for half an hour, and then, that no precaution might be omitted, the crew were ordered to muffle their oars. This done, we resumed our way, but at a much quieter pace, the land rising up before us an uniform black mass against the deep violet of the star-studded sky, without the faintest suggestion of detail of any kind whereby to direct our course. How Rawlings could possibly hit a spot so absolutely invisible as the ruin seemed quite incomprehensible to me; but there is no doubt he was specially gifted in that respect, it being apparently impossible for him to forget or confuse the slightest details of any locality which he had once visited.

Be that as it may, we paddled gently on until the boat was so completely within the shadow of the land that we were in utter darkness, it being impossible to distinguish the face of the stroke oarsman from where I sat. A few more strokes, and Rawlings uttered in a low tone the word "oars!" they were noiselessly laid in, and in another moment the boat's bow grated upon the shingle of the beach.

"Now as soon as we have landed, shove off to about fifty or sixty fathoms from the beach, and lay on your oars, ready to pull quietly in again when you hear me whistle three times. But if I *hail* instead of whistling, bend your backs and send her in upon the

beach with all your strength, and then jump out and shove her off again the moment I'm aboard, for in that case I shall have Johnny Crapaud after me," said Rawlings to the coxswain, as we stepped gingerly forward to the bow of the boat.

As soon as our feet touched the shingle, we turned round, and giving the boat's nose a vigorous shove launched her off the beach, with enough stern-way upon her to carry her the prescribed distance from the beach without the aid of the oars. As we stood for a moment watching her, we were much disconcerted to observe how distinctly she could be seen upon the surface of the starlit water by eyes which had become accustomed to the surrounding gloom.

I should have been seriously apprehensive of almost instant discovery, but for Rawlings's steady adherence to his original statement that no one would ever approach the place after dusk upon any consideration. As it was, I felt that the sooner Rawlings was once more on board and on his way back to the ship, the easier should I be in my mind ; I therefore proposed that we should push ahead for the high road without further pause.

The spot was indeed of a character calculated to impress with awe and superstitious dread the uneducated mind. The ground sloped steeply toward the shore, terminating, at its juncture with the beach, in a sort of low cliff or precipitous bank about thirty feet high, the face of which was densely overgrown with shrubs of various kinds, from the midst of which irregular strata of a coarse dirty-white marble cropped out. On the extreme verge of the cliff stood the shattered ruin already referred to, barely distinguishable from where we stood, as a gaunt, shapeless, indefinable mass ; while the beach below was encumbered with stones and blocks of masonry which had fallen from it from time to time. The uneven surface of the ground for some distance on each side of the ruin, and as far back as the road, was completely overshadowed by enormous cypress-trees, all of which seemed extremely ancient, while some appeared quite dead and withered. There was, in addition to these trees, a thick undergrowth of long rank grass and stunted shrubs, among which an outrageously prickly variety of the cactus made itself conspicuously apparent to the touch ; while, more than half hidden by the undergrowth, there were dotted here and there a few sepulchral stones and monuments in the very last stage of irretrievable dilapidation. Add to these sombre surroundings the melancholy sighing of the night-wind through the branches of the trees overhead, and the occasional weird cry of some nocturnal bird, and it will not be wondered at if I confess I felt a strong

desire to get beyond the precincts of the eerie place with as little delay as possible.

After listening intently for a minute or two, without hearing any sound whatever indicative of the proximity of the enemy, our eyes meanwhile growing more accustomed to the intense darkness, we pushed forward as rapidly as the nature of the ground would permit, and in about ten minutes more found ourselves in an excellent road about sixty feet wide, which Rawlings informed me led direct to Ajaccio, distant about seven miles.

"Now, Mr. Chester," said he, "my duty is ended as far as you are concerned, and all I have to do is to slip back to the beach and get off to the ship as soon as possible, and we shall not be long running out to her with this pretty little breeze. I only wish your task was as easy as the remainder of mine—but there, if it was, there'd be no honour nor credit in the doing of it, whereas I make no manner of doubt that if you succeed in this business your promotion will be certain the moment you've served long enough, and anyway it'll be a fine feather in your cap. I got an inkling of what it is, while talking to the skipper just now, but didn't get quite the rights of it; is it a secret?"

"Certainly not from *you*," I replied; "at least I have not been given to understand so. My errand is merely to deliver certain papers into the hands of a certain individual ashore here, and then rejoin the ship as early as possible. The task would be absurdly easy, were it not for the unsettled state of the country, which seems to be all up in arms, what with the French, the insurgent Corsicans, and the banditti, the latter being, I am told, especially dangerous."

"No doubt—no doubt!" remarked Rawlings in an absent sort of way. "Well, I wish you well over your cruise, my lad; keep a cool head, for it seems to me that you've white water all round you, whichever way you shape a course. Concerning the rejoining business, how are you going to set about that?"

"Captain Hood advised me to make the best of my way to the northern end of the island, as soon as I have delivered my despatches; he thinks it most likely I shall find the 'Juno' there."

"Ay, ay? So that's it, eh?" ejaculated Rawlings. "Well, I s'pose you'll haul your land-tacks aboard for that trip; it'll be a change from knocking about at sea. But if you find you can't work that traverse, just you slip down to Ajaccio some quiet night; there's a whole fleet of pleasure-boats of all sorts and sizes there; just jump aboard one of 'em, slip your moorings, and make a coasting v'yage of it. They're most of 'em capital sea-boats, and you know a good model

when you see one by this time, I s'pose. Don't take a larger craft than you can handle, and, above all, don't take a lateener ; they're fine craft when they have a full crew aboard as knows how to handle 'em, but they're dreadful awkward for one hand. You'll find some little things about five-and-twenty foot over all ; they're plenty large enough, and some of 'em are regular leg-o'-mutton-rigged—a big sail for'ard and a jigger aft ; they sail like witches, and'll go right in the wind's eye. Look out for one of them chaps ; one man can handle 'em in any weather. And now I must be off. Good-bye, my lad, and good luck to ye."

So saying, he shook hands, and, plunging into the shrubbery, disappeared.





CHAPTER XII.

BETRAYED INTO THE HANDS OF THE PHILISTINES.

I WAS now fairly embarked upon my adventure, the various difficulties of which seemed suddenly to present themselves to my mind in all their formidable reality. While safe on board the frigate, surrounded by my shipmates, they had appeared to be the veriest trifles, scarcely worth a serious thought ; but now that I stood alone in an enemy's country, with nothing to depend upon but my own sagacity and nerve, I saw in an instant—as though the truth had been revealed by a lightning-flash—that I had indeed undertaken a task, the successful performance of which would tax to their utmost extent every one of the qualities for which the skipper had given me credit.

However, I was now irretrievably in for it ; there was no possibility of backing out, had I been ever so inclined—but I was not ; I would have died first—so pulling myself together, and conquering by a strong effort a curious quaky sensation which had for a moment oppressed me, I set out upon my journey.

The spot to which I was bound was a chateau situated about eighteen miles inland, in the very heart of the mountain district. It was the property of Count Lorenzo Paoli, the brother of the General Paoli who, at the head of the Corsican insurgents, was then endeavouring to drive the French out of the island. My despatches—or whatever they were—were for Count Lorenzo ; and though I was of course unacquainted with their contents, I surmised that they had relation to some probable assistance to be rendered by the English to the Corsicans. Under ordinary circumstances my mission would have been extremely easy of accomplishment ; but, as I have already remarked, the island was in a thoroughly unsettled state, almost every male inhabitant being in arms.

The French, irritated by the rising of the Corsicans, and imbued with that feeling of cold-blooded and demoniacal ferocity which developed itself during the Reign of Terror, rendering that period

of French history for ever infamous, were of course those from whom I had most to fear. But the Corsicans, their naturally excitable temperament raised to frenzy by the atrocities of the French, rendered suspicious by frequent treachery, and impetuously rushing into a system of the most hideous reprisals, were almost equally dangerous, their creed being that he who was not with them must necessarily be against them; and their proceedings with regard to suspected persons were rumoured to be of the most summary character. Lastly, there were the brigands, composed principally of the very dregs of Corsican society, a community made up of all the criminality in the island, thieves, murderers, escaped convicts, and outcasts of every description, utterly destitute of the faintest spark of honour, patriotism, or humanity, preying upon friend and foe alike, and outstripping both in deeds of fiendish cruelty. As I thought these matters over, it seemed to me that my only safety lay in the most careful avoidance of every human eye, pursuing my journey during the dead of night, and lying *perdu* throughout the day.

A walk of two or three hundred yards along the main road brought me to the turning-off on the right, which I was directed to follow in order to gain the chateau. It appeared to be quite a by-road, so narrow that there seemed scarcely room for two vehicles to pass, and it was in a most wretched condition, the surface being ploughed into deep broad ruts, and completely cut up by the feet of cattle.

It led apparently through the heart of an extensive forest, the trees of which, uniting their branches overhead, must have veiled the way in semi-obscurity even at noon-day. When I turned into it—at about two o'clock a.m.—the starlit sky gave just sufficient light to enable me to pursue my way along the main road; but by the time I had penetrated a couple of hundred yards into this by-path, I was enveloped in a perfectly Egyptian darkness. By degrees, however, my vision became accustomed to the gloom, and I stumbled on over the uneven ground for a distance of some twelve miles, when daylight began to appear through the leafy canopy overhead, and prudence suggested to me the desirability of forthwith seeking some safe hiding-place wherein to pass the day and take that repose of which I was beginning to feel the need. I therefore turned off the road and plunged into the forest for about a quarter of a mile, when I came upon a dense and almost impenetrable thicket which seemed admirably suited to my purpose; I accordingly forced my way into it until I found a spot of clear ground wide enough to stretch myself upon comfortably, when flinging myself upon the turf, and placing my bag beneath my head, I almost immediately dropped off into a deep and dreamless slumber.

It was just three o'clock in the afternoon when I awoke. My somewhat unwonted exertions of the previous night had greatly fatigued me, and I should probably have slept on until darkness had once more returned, had it not been for a wandering sun-ray which had found its way through the branches overhead, and, shining directly in my face, had awakened me. I awoke stiff, ravenously hungry, and parched with thirst. I had had the forethought to provide against an inopportune attack of the former feeling, by putting a biscuit or two in my pocket; but in the excitement of coming away I had omitted—as I now found to my chagrin—to bring my flask with me. I accordingly brought out my biscuits, and endeavoured to make a meal of them alone, but they were, like all biscuits, dry, and my throat was so parched that I found I could scarcely swallow a mouthful. While struggling with this little difficulty a faint breeze brought to my ear a sound which I decided must be the rushing of a distant stream over its rocky bed, and thinking of nothing at the moment so much as my intense thirst, I sprang to my feet, and seizing my bag, set out in the direction from which the sound appeared to come.

My progress was anything but rapid, the ground being entirely overgrown with creepers and thick shrubs, but that I was proceeding in the right direction was satisfactorily demonstrated by the increasing distinctness with which I could hear the sound of the rushing water.

My exertions in the close and stifling atmosphere of the wood soon made me uncomfortably warm, at the same time increasing my thirst to an almost unbearable degree, but there was nothing for it but patience, so I pushed on, panting and perspiring, as rapidly as it was possible for me to get over the ground. As I continued to advance, the sound increased in volume, though it still appeared to come from a considerable distance, and I at length came to the conclusion that it was not caused so much by the rush of the river over its bed as by the fall of the water down a cataract. The surmise eventually proved to be correct, for after an hour and a half of severe exertion, the latter half-hour of which I had been journeying over steeply-rising ground, I found myself beside a considerable stream, the waters of which, about a hundred yards higher up, came foaming and tumbling down from a height of some fifty feet, through a deep cleft in the face of the rock, into a deep, transparent pool, from whence they passed away over a rocky bed, and wound out of sight among the trees.

It was a lovely spot upon which I had thus stumbled. The ground rose abruptly on both sides of the stream; that on the oppo-

site side being a rocky precipice, the strata of variously-coloured stone twisted and contorted in the most extraordinary manner, geraniums of various hues growing out from between the interstices of the rock, and the summit of the precipice crowned with a rich profusion of trailing creepers, some of which, notwithstanding the time of year, were in blossom, and the perfume of which scented the air.

Round the mossy rim of the basin into which the waters fell, and which appeared to be always damp with spray, grew a profusion of exquisitely delicate ferns; the sward beyond was thickly starred with a species of double daisy and the elegant hyacinth, and enclosing all was the pine wood through which I had been travelling.

The beauties of the place, however, had no attraction for me until I had in some measure assuaged my burning thirst, which I did by going down upon my hands and knees on a convenient rock, and plunging my heated face into the cool, pellucid water. I was careful to drink at first with extreme moderation, and then, having satisfied the first sharp craving for a draught, I stripped and plunged in, treating myself to as thorough an ablution as was possible in the absence of my cake of old brown windsor. Refreshed and invigorated with the bath, I at length emerged, and dressing with all expedition, sat down to discuss my biscuits, which I disposed of to the last mouthful, gazing admiringly upon my surroundings meanwhile.

My meal finished, it became necessary for me to set out forthwith in search of the road which was to guide me to my destination. I had no intention whatever of retracing my steps over the ground already traversed. In the first place, I was exceedingly doubtful whether I could find my way back to the spot from which I had started, and in the next, I considered that it would be simply a waste of time and strength. I had not been altogether unmindful of the course I was steering while seeking for the river, and I was of opinion that though I had been travelling rather away from the road, if anything, yet on the whole my course had been pretty much in its direction. In order to regain it, therefore, all that seemed necessary was to make my way in a direction about at right angles with my former course.

I accordingly edged away in what I judged to be the right direction, choosing my ground, however, more with a view to easy than to direct progress. I estimated that it would occupy about an hour, or perhaps an hour and a half—certainly not more—to regain the road, and as I was anxious to do this before it became

quite dark, I pushed rapidly forward, and the wood growing somewhat more open as I proceeded, with less undergrowth, I made very fair progress.

The hour which I had allowed myself passed, and still there was no sign of the road. I felt sure, however, that it could not be far away, and at all events I was going in the right direction, the ground rising continuously, so I carried on under a heavy press of sail, expecting every moment to emerge into the beaten track, and growing increasingly anxious to do so as I noted the rapidity with which darkness was falling upon the scene, notwithstanding the fact that the trees were by this time so far apart and the ground so clear that walking was as easy as it would have been on the road itself. In this state of mingled hope and anxiety I hurried on for another hour, still without hitting upon the road; by which time it had become so dark that I grew fearful of losing my way. The stars had appeared, and shone brilliantly, their light, however, being insufficient to enable me to see where I was going; so after stumbling on over the uneven ground for a quarter of an hour longer, during which I experienced more than one awkward tumble, the conclusion forced itself upon me that I had strayed somewhat from the right direction, and had better defer until the next morning any further effort to discover the lost road.

Having arrived at this conclusion, my next business was to find a tolerably comfortable spot in which to bestow myself for the night. While searching for this, I quite unexpectedly reached the edge of the wood, and in another minute stood beyond its boundary, finding myself upon a broad expanse of rugged, open moorland, at the farther extremity of which the ground again rose steeply until it terminated in what was evidently the ridge of the mountain-chain running north and south through the island.

Two circumstances struck me at the same moment on emerging into the open, one of which was that a heavy thunder-storm was rapidly working up against the wind, the other being that a hut or hovel of some sort stood about half a mile distant.

The question immediately arose in my mind whether I should approach this building, upon the chance of obtaining a night's lodging therein, or whether it would be more prudent to pass the night and brave the gathering storm in the open. I might of course have returned to the comparative shelter of the wood, but I should have been obliged to penetrate it for some distance before it would be thick enough to afford me the slightest protection from the deluge of rain which was coming up in those black and threatening clouds, and, in addition to this, I felt that, while only

inadequately sheltered from the rain, I should be exposed to the very serious danger of being struck by lightning. Then again, it was possible that the hut might be deserted, in which case I need have no hesitation about availing myself of its shelter. There was of course, on the other hand, a chance of its being inhabited, but if so, its occupant would probably be no one more dangerous than a simple herd or woodcutter, and it was not from such that I had anything to fear. As I stood irresolute, turning these matters over in my mind, a vivid flash of lightning, followed, after a pause of some seconds, by the long reverberating roll of distant thunder, reminded me of the desirability of coming to a decision, one way or another, without delay ; I accordingly made up my mind to risk going to the hut, rather than remain exposed to the storm.

I therefore hurried forward, the lightning meanwhile flashing out more and more vividly, and at shorter intervals ; the thunder sounding louder and nearer at every discharge ; and the vast curtain of cloud spreading rapidly athwart the sky, obliterating the stars, and enveloping nature in a pall of awful gloom.

On approaching the hut, it became apparent that it was uninhabited, for the door hung pendent from one hinge, the other being wrenched off, while of the two small windows which admitted light to the interior, one sash was gone altogether, the aperture being completely denuded of every vestige of woodwork, while the other was protected only by a battered and weather-stained wooden shutter. The edifice itself was constructed of sods, the roof being roughly framed together with branches—no doubt lopped from the trees of the neighbouring wood—and thatched.

I reached the building only just in time. While yet a hundred yards or so from it, the cool night-breeze dropped all in a moment, and was succeeded by a hushed and breathless calm. An awful silence suddenly fell upon nature, the myriad insect voices became mute, the night-birds ceased to utter their melancholy cries, the sighing of the wind through the trees of the distant wood was no longer heard ; a hush of dread expectancy ensued. A few seconds elapsed, and then a mysterious murmur filled the air, the trees swayed and tossed their branches wildly for a moment, a fierce gust of hot air swept past, and all was still again. I dashed forward and reached the doorway, and as I passed across the threshold, the canopy of cloud overhead was rent open, a blinding flash of livid lightning blazed out, illumining for a single instant the whole landscape, as well as the interior of the building, and at the same instant came a deafening crash, such as might occur were the universe suddenly to crumble into ruin. So near was the lightning

that I really fancied (if it *was* fancy and not fact after all) I could feel it scorch my cheek, and there could be no doubt whatever about the strong sulphurous smell which pervaded the atmosphere.

Again and yet again flashed forth the terrible lightning, crash on crash came the thunder, and then the flood-gates of heaven were opened, and the rain came rushing down in a perfect torrent.

I expected nothing less than to be speedily flooded out, but fortunately the roof of the hut proved weather-tight, and the rain happening to beat upon the back of the house, in which were no openings, the interior of the place remained perfectly dry.

I took advantage of the frequent lightning-flashes to survey the interior of my place of shelter, which I ascertained to be entirely devoid of furniture of every kind, there being absolutely nothing in the place except a heap of wood in one corner, composed of dry twigs and branches, probably gathered from the adjacent forest.

I stood in the doorway for some time, watching the magnificent spectacle of the storm, until an increasing sensation of fatigue reminded me of the desirability of resting while I had the opportunity. I accordingly fixed upon a spot which seemed tolerably free from the eddies of wind which found easy access to the building, and first, by some strange instinct for which I cannot account, concealing the bag in which were the despatches among the wood stacked in the corner, placed my back against the wall, and folding my arms soon dropped off into a deep sleep, lulled thereto by the sound of the pouring rain upon the roof.

I seemed to have been asleep but a few minutes, when I became conscious of an odour of burning pine ; then through my still-closed eyelids I perceived that the hut was lighted up. I heard the crackling sound of the blazing torch, and, as consciousness fully returned, I also heard voices speaking in a low tone in French.

"Are you quite certain this is he? Why, he is a mere lad!" I heard a voice exclaim.

"Quite sure, noble signor," replied another voice, gruff, harsh, and repellent. "I could see plainly, though the night was dark ; I had been watching the approach of the boat, and had been lying so long concealed in the darkest part of the ruins that my eyes had grown thoroughly accustomed to the gloom, so that when I followed this one and the other to the road, it seemed quite light. Moreover, they both passed close to me as I was making my way through the trees towards the road, and I saw their faces distinctly enough to recognize them both again wherever I might meet them. I never forget a face I have once seen," the voice added in a sinister tone.

“Umph !” ejaculated the first voice. “I can scarcely credit that the English captain would be fool enough to entrust important despatches to so young an officer. Poor lad ! how soundly he sleeps ; he must have lost his way and been wandering aimlessly about in the wood. By-the-way, did you hear him say where he had secreted those same despatches ?”

“No, signor, I did not ; but he had a bag with him when he landed, no doubt they are in that.”

“A bag ? What sort of a bag ? I see no bag here anywhere. Perhaps—look here, Monsieur Guiseppe, or whatever your name is, I hope you are not playing fast and loose with us. You have not stolen the bag and handed over the despatches to some of your own people, claiming a reward for the safe conveyance of such important documents, eh ?”

“Stolen ? For what does your mightiness take me ?”

“For a traitor, my good fellow—nay, no occasion to snatch at your knife in that threatening fashion ; it is dangerous, for I am a hasty man, and apt to use these without much reflection,” and I heard the click of a pistol-lock. “I am sorry if I have wounded your delicate sense of honour, but when a man sells his own countrymen for gold, one is a little—just a trifle, you know—apt to be suspicious of him.”

“A man *must* live,” responded the churlish voice. “I have a wife and children to feed and clothe, and no man would employ me. If I have turned traitor, it is because I have been driven to it.”

“No doubt, no doubt,” remarked the other speaker in a somewhat sarcastic tone of voice. “The good Corsicans, your fellow-countrymen, have perhaps been weak enough to allow your slightly singular cast of countenance to prejudice them against you, eh ? Well, I really cannot blame them ; you must yourself admit that it is the reverse of prepossessing.”

“I am as God made me,” growled the traitorous Corsican.

“Say rather, as the devil and your own evil passions made you,” retorted the Frenchman. “Do not libel your Creator by attributing to Him any share in the work of moulding a visage whereon the words ‘TREACHERY, AVARICE, THEFT, and MURDER’ are printed in large capitals. You may possibly have been born simply ugly, but your present hang-dog cast of countenance is entirely your own handiwork, my good friend Guiseppe. Now *pray* do not fumble at your knife again, that is an excessively bad habit which you have contracted ; take my advice and break it off. If you do not, it will assuredly get you into serious trouble some day.”

The individual thus addressed muttered some inaudible reply, which sounded, however, very much like an imprecation, to which his tormentor responded with a gay laugh. Then I heard the door creak upon its solitary hinge and scrape along the ground, as it was dragged open, and the voice of the Frenchman said, addressing some one outside,—

“Well, Pierre, how are things in general looking by this time?”

“Much better, *mon sergent*,” replied another voice. “The rain has ceased, the clouds are dispersing, and yonder appears the first gleam of daybreak.”

“That is well,” remarked the sergeant. “We will wait another half-hour, by which time it will be light enough to see where we are going, and then we must march once more.”

The door creaked to again; I heard a sound as of some one settling himself comfortably, and then all was once more silent, save for the sound of heavy breathing, of which I had been cognizant all through the foregoing conversation.

I had been fully awakened, as may easily be supposed, by almost the first words which I had distinctly heard; but I had presence of mind enough not to give any indication of the fact. It was clear that this rascally Corsican—who appeared to be regularly in league with the enemy—had unfortunately witnessed my landing, and he must also have overheard and understood much if not all of the conversation which had passed between Rawlings and myself. And it seemed equally clear that he had put the Frenchmen upon my track, and that to him I was chiefly indebted for my unlucky capture—for of course I *was* a prisoner, though they had not roused me to make me acquainted with the fact. As soon as the conversation ceased, I rapidly turned the circumstances over in my mind, and decided upon two things, one of which was to keep secret my knowledge of the French language, and the other, to act upon the idea suggested by the sergeant’s words, and lead him to believe that my bag with the despatches had been stolen from me. For the rest, I was unable to form any plan, my original one of passing for a German art student being completely knocked on the head by the Corsican’s discovery; so I resolved to be governed by the turn which events might take.

On one thing I was resolved, and that was to keep careful watch for an opportunity to escape, as I was in imminent risk of being hanged or shot at any moment, so long as I remained a prisoner.

Notwithstanding my anxiety, I was dozing off once more, when footsteps approached me, a hand was laid on my shoulder, and the

voice of the sergeant exclaimed in French, "Hallo, here ! awake, my young friend, awake !"

I opened my eyes with a start, and saw standing before me a young man of about four-and-twenty years of age. He was dressed in the uniform of a French regiment of the line—blue tunic, red trowsers with a stripe of yellow braid down the seam, red forage cap trimmed with the same, and his sword buckled close up to his belt. He had dark hair and eyes, the latter of which beamed upon me good-naturedly, and he had a pleasant expression of countenance, which afforded me much comfort.

Seated or reclining in more or less uncomfortable attitudes against the walls of the hut were some five-and-twenty men wearing a similar uniform, their muskets being piled in the middle of the room ; while, apart from the rest, was a man standing with his back towards me, gazing abstractedly out of the window. He was dressed in the ordinary Corsican garb, and was leaning upon a long-barrelled musket, the butt of which rested upon the floor, his hands being crossed upon the muzzle of the barrel, and his chin resting upon them.

"Good morning !" said I in English to the sergeant, as I struggled to my feet ; "who are you, pray, and where have you come from ?"

"Approach, most amiable Guiseppe, and lend us your valuable aid as interpreter," said the sergeant, turning to the Corsican ; "and see, my friend, that you interpret correctly. What was it he said ?"

The Corsican, whose brutal and sinister countenance fully justified the sergeant's previous remarks upon it, translated my salutation into excellent French.

"Tell him," said the sergeant, "that you saw him land, and overheard sufficient of his conversation with his fellow-officer to satisfy you that he is the bearer of despatches from the English to one of your countrymen ; that you betrayed him, and that I and my men were in consequence sent out to scour the country in search of him. Tell him also that, being found, he may make up his mind to be hanged before sunset ; or—no, do not say anything about the hanging at present, he will know all about that soon enough, poor lad !"

The rascal translated this speech in a manner to suit himself ; that is, he said never a word concerning his own treachery, but to make up for the omission he included that part which had reference to my probable speedy fate.

Of course I had learned pretty much all this in the first conversation between him and the sergeant ; it was no news to me, but it

terribly confirmed the surmises which had suggested themselves to my mind when I first became conscious that I was a prisoner. There was a single ray of hope, it is true, to which I clung, but it was by no means bright. I was evidently to be taken before his commanding officer, and I would acquaint him with the fact of my being a British officer, and claim to be treated as a prisoner of war. But then there was the ugly fact of my being in plain clothes—how was that to be got over? There was of course the shadow of a possibility that I might get out of my difficulties, could I but fabricate a sufficiently ingenious string of falsehoods ; but now that it actually came to the point, I could not bring myself to the depths of meanness and cowardice which this involved. I had learned at school the maxim that “liars never prosper,” and my dear old father had taught me to avoid falsehood from much higher considerations than those of mere temporal prosperity. I determined therefore that, whatever the danger, I would not endeavour to shield myself by anything so despicable as a lie.

In the meantime it was no use to be down-hearted over my misfortune, that would only tend to make matters worse instead of better ; besides which, I had no notion of showing my enemies that I was disheartened or apprehensive ; so I brightened up, and assuming a great deal more nonchalance than I felt, I directed the Corsican to inquire our destination, and also to say that I hoped we should breakfast before starting, as I felt frightfully hungry.

He interpreted my question, adding that, as he supposed the sergeant could find his way back to Ajaccio without assistance, he would now leave us, as he had several matters requiring his immediate attention. Before going, however, he trusted that the sergeant would pay him the reward promised in case of my capture, or give him a note to the colonel, certifying that he had duly performed his contract.

The sergeant seemed rather surprised at the proposal ; beyond expressing, however, an ironical regret that the party was to be deprived of Master Guiseppe's entertaining society, he made no demur, and drawing an old letter from his pocket he scribbled in pencil on the inner side of the envelope the required certificate, which he handed over to the Corsican with the remark,—

“There you are, most glorious Apollo ; take care of it, for it is worth more than you are likely to honestly earn for many a year to come. Will you stay and have some breakfast? No? Well, good-bye then for the present ; I dare say we shall meet again.”

“Assuredly, signor, and not long hence, I trust. For breakfast

I have all I require with me, and I shall eat as I travel, since time is precious with me, and I wish to get a lift as far as Ajaccio in one or other of the market carts. *Au revoir!*"

The Corsican flung his musket over his shoulder as he spoke, and, thrusting the certificate into his ammunition pouch, strode out of the hut and disappeared, just as one of the men entered with a pot of hot coffee, which had been prepared outside.

Upon this the sergeant produced some bread and meat from his wallet, and drawing forth a knife divided it into two equal parts, one of which he offered me, saying,—

"Come, *mon enfant*, eat and be merry while you have the opportunity. We have a long tramp before us, and for you there is probably a still longer journey afterwards; still, do not let that spoil your appetite. We cannot understand each other, but I am sorry for you, *pauvre garçon!* and we may as well be friends for the short time that remains."

He offered me his hand, as he said this, which I shook heartily.

The speech was by no means calculated to raise my spirits, but I took pains to conceal my knowledge of its import, hoping that my supposed ignorance of the language would cause the men to speak unrestrainedly to each other, and perhaps let fall some piece of information of value, should I see a chance to make my escape.

We fell to at our breakfast, for which, strange to say, I had a very tolerable appetite, notwithstanding the disastrous turn which my affairs had taken, and the soldiers, producing what provisions they had, also set their teeth to work upon them with a will, laughing and chattering gaily together meanwhile, but without letting drop any information likely to help me out of my difficulty.

Breakfast over, the men fell in. I was placed in the centre of the body, the sergeant giving instructions to those having my more immediate custody to shoot me on the instant, should I make any attempt to escape. The word was given to march, and we tramped away across the moor for about a couple of miles, when we struck upon a beaten track, into which we turned, and which I learned from a remark made by one of the men was the road to Ajaccio.





CHAPTER XIII.

BELL' DEMONIO.

AS we trudged along, I had an opportunity to study to some extent the characteristics of the individuals forming my escort, and I may say without reserve that a more unprepossessing set of men it has seldom been my lot to encounter. With the solitary exception of the sergeant, who seemed a gay, careless, good-natured fellow enough, they appeared to be a thoroughly "bad lot :—" low, ruffianly-looking men in their outward semblance, and—judging from their conversation, much of which, however, I failed to understand from their liberal use of what is now termed "slang"—utterly given over to the indulgence of the lowest and most degrading forms of vice, scoffing at all things pure and holy, and luxuriating in the recital of deeds of all manner of cruelty and debauchery.

I had heard something of the terribly-brutalizing effects of the Reign of Terror, but the conversation of these wretches gave me such a vivid insight of the incredible depths of depravity of which the human mind is sometimes capable as I could certainly not otherwise have gained, unless indeed by associating with the ruffians who gathered daily round the guillotine to insult and exult over the death-agonies of their victims.

It was not to be expected that I should altogether escape the attentions of wretches such as these, and accordingly my ears were soon assailed with ribald jests and ruffianly speculations touching the mode and time of my execution, the manner in which I should bear myself, and so on ; but I turned a deaf ear to it all, devoting my entire energies to the devising of some practicable method of escape, and, as it appeared to them that I understood nothing of what was said, my tormentors after a time turned their conversation to other matters.

"I expect we shall very soon make another excursion in this direction," said one.

“Indeed, and for what purpose?” asked another.

“Nay, then, has it not been told thee, Adolphe, that our colonel suspects one of these Corsican aristocrats of being concerned in the present rising of his countrymen, and of plotting with the accursed English for assistance?” remarked the first speaker.

“*Mille bombes!* that it might be so. It would be rare sport to hunt the old rat out of his hole, or, better still, burn him in it. It would be a pleasant change from the dullness of mounting eternal guard, marching and countermarching every day, and all to what purpose? For my part I am tired of it, and long for a little more of the sport we had in dear Paris. Ah! it was worth living for, to see fifty or sixty of the proud aristocrats carted away to the guillotine every day. I doubt if there is such a thing as a guillotine in the whole island.

“*Soyez tranquille, mon cher Adolphe!* The machine is not difficult to construct. But for real amusement give me such as we had at Ostend, when Davoust shot down with grape 500 men, women, and children under the ramparts, to say nothing of those which we sent afloat in the harbour in old and leaky boats which sank with all on board. And, ah, the sport that it was to chase the people through the streets until they could fly no longer, and then bayonet them! You were there, Antoine, *mon camarade*; you have not forgotten the day?”

“And never shall,” responded Antoine, the most ruffianly-looking of the whole party. “A day or two like that would bring these vile Corsicans to their senses. ‘Give them plenty of bayonet,’ say I. And if you want real sport, do as I did: chase the mothers until they drop, then bayonet their children first, and themselves afterwards. But do not bayonet the mothers *too* soon, or you rob yourself of half your amusement.”

“Good! ah, ah! *very* good indeed!” laughed the wretches.

“But say, Baptiste, *mon cher*, who is this Corsican of whom you were speaking?”

“He is called Count Lorenzo Paoli,” responded Baptiste. “He has a fine place away yonder among the hills, which, it is said, would make those rich who could have the plundering of it. And, moreover, he has a daughter—ah! but she is simply divine,” and the brute smacked his lips in a way which made me long to spring at his throat. “*Le cher Guiseppe*—is he not delightful?—says that this boy Englishman has papers which are thought to be for this rascally Count, and if it be so, *ma foi!* but there will be rare doings at the chateau before long.”

It may be imagined what were my feelings on hearing this.

How fervently I blessed the lucky inspiration which prompted me to conceal my bag, and how much more imperative now became the necessity that I should effect my escape without delay, not only for my own sake, but in order also that I might recover possession of those compromising papers, and warn the Count of the fearful danger which threatened him.

There was much more conversation of the kind recorded above, but I will not revolt the reader's feelings by repeating it; what I have already given is intended merely to convey an idea of the unparalleled ruffianism and brutality which characterized the soldiery of the Republic at that period.

The way, which was being enlivened with such delectable converse, led back through the forest which I had already traversed, only we were now passing along the road, such as it was. It consisted simply of a path of varying width, but nowhere very wide, cleared through the trees, the undergrowth of the forest forming a sort of hedge on either side of the way. The branches met overhead, veiling the path in semi-obscurity, and so completely intercepting all but an occasional ray of the sun that the ground appeared to be in a perpetual state of dampness, the clayey soil being in consequence so much cut up, notwithstanding the small amount of traffic which seemed to pass over it, that it had become almost impracticable for foot-passengers. Here and there an old tree-stump projected out of the ground, while in other places the stumps had been removed without filling in the corresponding hole. These holes were now full of water, and as they sometimes occurred in places where there was a general depression of the ground, flooded by the heavy rain of the previous night, their presence only became known when one of the party floundered in and found himself, if lucky enough to avoid going head over heels, and so securing entire immersion, up to the waist in muddy water of about the consistency of pea-soup. To add still farther to the discomfort of the journey, the ground was excessively slippery, so that, what with one difficulty and another, we made but very slow progress.

We had reached and become involved in an exceptionally bad spot—a spring apparently rendering the clay so soft that the entire road for about thirty yards had been worked into a perfect quagmire, into which we sank above our knees at every step, the tenacious clay holding our feet almost as though they had been in a vice—when, without the slightest warning of any kind, a withering volley of musketry was poured in upon the devoted band from the bushes on both sides of the road, and while the smoke still enveloped us out dashed some thirty or forty Corsicans, armed,

some only with their clubbed muskets, others flourishing in addition long double-edged knives of a most bloodthirsty appearance.

Every man of us went down before that deadly discharge ; some being killed outright, while a few, myself among the number, were only wounded. But the tragedy was soon completed ; hampered as we were with the difficulties of the road, and disabled by our wounds, resistance was impossible, and before the smoke of the musketry-discharge had cleared away every Frenchman had received the *coup-de-grâce*. I also should undoubtedly have received my quietus, had I not had the presence of mind to exclaim in French, just as a stalwart mountaineer was bending over me with his long glittering blade upraised, that I was an Englishman. The man hesitated for an instant, and that slight pause saved me. I rapidly explained who and what I was, and another individual, apparently the leader of the band, approaching at the moment, I was reprieved until an opportunity could be found for verifying my statement. In the meantime, however, my captors were kind enough to take charge of my watch, my money, and one or two other valuables which they found in my pockets.

The bodies of the Frenchmen were rifled with a thoroughness and celerity which I could not but admire, their pockets being turned inside out, and every article of the slightest value, including their weapons and ammunition, appropriated. One individual especially, who was working away with his back turned towards me, appeared to possess all the coolness and dexterity of a London pick-pocket.

He was certainly not much troubled with squeamishness either ; for while operating upon the body of the sergeant, he discovered upon one of the fingers a ring, which, being unable to remove, he without hesitation drew his keen blade across the member, severing it from the body at a single stroke ; he then removed the ring, dropped it coolly into his pouch, and jauntily jerked the dismembered finger in among the shrubs by the roadside. Then, animated apparently by a sudden frenzy, he plunged his blade again and again into the lifeless body, his fury increasing with every stroke, until the uniform was slashed almost to rags, finishing off by drawing his weapon across and across the face, until it was mutilated beyond all possibility of recognition. He then rose to his feet with a sigh of satisfaction, while the admiring laughter and jocular remarks of his comrades evinced their high appreciation of the performance.

Turning round, he faced me just in good time to catch on my features the expression of sickening disgust with which I had

viewed his actions. A threatening scowl instantly overspread his repulsive features, and, raising his knife, he advanced with such an evident intention of using it upon me, that three or four of his companions interposed, and with considerable difficulty at length succeeded in dissuading him from his purpose.

It was the traitor Guiseppa.

The booty, such as it was, being secured, the party marched off the ground, taking a contrary direction to that pursued by the Frenchmen. I was placed in the centre of the band, the leader of which was kind enough to warn me that any attempt at escape would be promptly met by an effectual application of the knife. It thus appeared that I had only escaped from one danger to fall into a second, almost, if not equally, as great. Had my captors been merely insurgents, I should not have felt any very great anxiety ; but, though I was not directly addressed, I gathered within the first few minutes of our march that I had fallen into the hands of a party of brigands, and from all that I had heard of the unscrupulous character of these gentry, I believed that they would not have the slightest hesitation about murdering me, if the whim seized them, merely by way of "divarshin."

My left arm had been broken above the elbow by a musket-shot in the fusilade which had destroyed the Frenchmen, and, dangling helplessly at my side, gave me exquisite pain, as I stumbled along over the uneven and slippery road. The injury was plainly perceptible, yet no one offered to bind up the bleeding limb, and of course it was quite impossible for me to do so myself. I might have requested one of my captors to perform the service for me, but a scrutiny of their countenances afforded me so little encouragement that I decided to suffer on, rather than place myself in their rough and merciless hands.

On emerging from the wood, we turned off to the left, and, forsaking the road altogether, made across the moor in the direction of another wood, which entirely clothed the sides to the very summit of a high hill about five miles distant. We were a couple of hours performing the journey across the open moor, and another hour was occupied in threading our way through the wood, the ground being very rugged and rising steeply all the while. At length, however, we reached a wide open space along one side of which a mountain-stream was noisily rushing "in spate," as they say in Scotland ; the surroundings of the place being very similar to those of the spot where I had quenched my thirst, and bathed on the previous evening—the principal difference being that here there was no waterfall. Instead, however, of this being a picturesque

solitude, it had all the bustle and animation of a camp upon a small scale.

As we drew near the place, although there had been no visible sign of the proximity of other human beings, signal whistles had been given and answered, and I was consequently in a measure prepared for the scene which suddenly burst upon us on emerging into the open.

Some twenty or more bell-shaped tents were disposed in a circle on the greensward, the little tricoloured bannerets, which in some cases still fluttered at their apex, seeming to indicate that they had at no very distant period been French property. In the centre of the circle a large wood fire was blazing and crackling, with an immense cauldron hanging suspended over it, gipsy fashion, from a tripod.

A man in white cap and apron—he turned out to be a French prisoner—was standing over this pot, armed with a long iron ladle with which he kept diligently stirring up its contents, the savoury steam from which was greeted with ejaculations of approval from my hungry captors. Outside the doors of some of the tents the muskets of its occupants were piled, the owners of the weapons, for the most part, being scattered about the sward in picturesque groups; some laughing, talking, and smoking together, while others were deeply interested in games of cards—played with packs so greasy, worn, and thumb-marked, that those who had used them a few times would as readily recognize a particular card on seeing its back as they would by looking at its face—while a few, more industriously disposed, were diligently cleaning and polishing their weapons.

There must have been quite a hundred men in the camp altogether, counting the detachment which had brought me in, all wearing the garb of Corsican mountaineers; and a fine, stalwart set of men they were, almost without exception. Their countenances, however, wore an expression of reckless, relentless ferocity, which augured ill for any unfortunate against whom they might fancy they had a grievance, should he chance to fall into their clutches.

My captors were dismissed immediately on our arrival in camp, with the exception of two who mounted guard over me, while their leader entered a tent somewhat larger than the rest. We were quickly surrounded by a group of curious and eager questioners, anxious apparently to learn the result of the expedition, and to “take stock” of the prisoner—my unlucky self.

The information supplied by my custodians evidently afforded

them great gratification, and though they spoke a patois which was quite unintelligible to me, the gesticulations which accompanied the closing portion of the narrative, and the shouts of laughter and applause with which it was received, showed me that the exploit of the amiable Guiseppe was duly receiving honourable mention.

After an absence of about twenty minutes, the individual whom I have designated as the leader of the party which brought me in, issued from the tent, and, coming up to where I stood, said, with much greater courtesy than I had hitherto received,—

“Be good enough to step this way, Signor Englishman, if you please.”

I followed him into the tent from which he had just emerged, and found myself in the presence of an individual whose appearance differed so entirely from that of the rest of the band, that I could not help wondering what could possibly have induced her to associate herself with them.

Start not, reader, at the word *her*—it is no misprint; I actually found myself in the presence of a *woman*. Not such an one, either, as might be expected to be found—if indeed one would expect to find a woman at all—amid such surroundings; not an old, withered, vindictive-looking hag, repulsive alike in appearance and manner, but a woman, youthful, handsome, and to all appearance gentle, though her demeanour was somewhat cold and distant.

I set her down at about three or four and twenty years of age. She was reclining on a pile of rugs when I entered the tent, so I could not just then judge of her stature, but before the interview terminated she had risen to her feet, and I then saw that she was rather above medium height. Her skin was dazzling fair, hair and eyes black as night; the beauty of the latter being rather marred, according to my taste, by a curious glitter, which, but for the calmness of their owner's demeanour, I should have regarded as slightly suggestive of incipient insanity. Her figure, clothed in a picturesque, if somewhat theatrical, adaptation of the costume of her comrades, was somewhat slight, but eminently graceful, while her hands and feet would have delighted a sculptor with their symmetry. Her voice was especially beautiful, being a full, rich, and powerful contralto.

The midshipmen of the British navy have not as yet rendered themselves especially remarkable by their bashfulness, and I was neither much better nor much worse than my neighbours in that respect; but I was so taken aback when I entered the tent and my

eyes met those of its occupant, that I could only bow somewhat awkwardly, blushing like a simpleton the while.

"This, signora, is the prisoner of whom I told you," said my conductor by way of introduction.

"Why, he is a mere boy, Benedetto ; and wounded, too ! What is the nature of your wound, child ?"

"A broken arm, signora," I replied unsteadily ; the unexpected accents of pity in her voice, or the excruciating pain I had been suffering for the previous four hours, suddenly unnerving me.

"Poor fellow !" she exclaimed. "And it has not been attended to. How did it happen ?"

"A stray ball struck me this morning, when the party under this gentleman surprised and shot down the French detachment," I answered.

A gleam of almost fiendish ferocity passed like a lightning-flash across the beautiful face of my fair interrogator at the mention of the French ; but it disappeared again in an instant, and, turning to Benedetto, she asked with just the slightest ring of harshness in her voice,—

"Is the Padre in camp ?"

"He is not," was the reply. "He left us yesterday to go into Ajaccio, telling us not to expect him back here until late to-night."

"Then I will turn leech myself," said she. "It will not be for the first time. Fetch me a bowl of water from the stream, Benedetto, and bid them bring some wine to the tent."

Benedetto departed upon his mission with alacrity, and my hostess, or whatever she was, rising to her feet, bared her beautiful, round, white arms to the elbow, drew from a large chest a supply of lint and old linen, and, arming herself from the same depository with a pair of scissors, proceeded deftly to slit up from wrist to shoulder the left sleeve of my jacket and shirt. By the time that this was done, Benedetto had returned with a bowl of water in one hand, and a jar of wine in the other. A small quantity of the latter revived my strength and steadied my nerves, and then this curious pair went to work to dress my wound, and set the shattered limb, displaying during the operation an amount of skill on the part of the woman, and of gentleness on that of the man, for which I was wholly unprepared.

A set of splints, which had evidently seen previous service, was finally produced and applied, and the arm carefully adjusted in a sling, after which food was placed before me ; and though I was suffering too much pain and in too feverish a condition to take much,

I soon found myself in a condition of ease which was comfort itself compared with my state during the earlier part of the day.

At the conclusion of my meal I was advised, or I might say *ordered*, to lie down upon the pile of rugs which my strange hostess had vacated ; an order which I obeyed gladly, for fatigue and pain together had produced a feeling of almost utter exhaustion, and, in spite of the anguish of my wound, I soon dropped off into a doze which was a something between sleeping and waking, in which, while my consciousness never entirely left me, my fancy, breaking away from the control of reason, rambled off and indulged in the most extraordinary vagaries. I heard the rush of the stream, the murmur of the wind through the branches of the trees with which the camp was surrounded, the hum of many voices outside the tent, the frequent snatch of song, or peal of laughter, the occasional angry altercation, and—once or twice—voices speaking in low tones within the tent ; but all seemed to strike upon my ear as though the sounds reached me from an incredible distance, and then the absurd idea took possession of me that I was increasing in bulk to such an extraordinary extent, that my recumbent body covered miles of ground.

Then my sight seemed to undergo an equally extraordinary alteration, for it appeared that I was able to see away over the tree-tops down into the town of Ajaccio ; the lines of the streets, the architecture of the houses, and the very features of the inhabitants being distinguishable. Then I thought I was rising gradually in the air, my powers of vision steadily increasing at the same time. First I saw the wide stretch of blue foam-flecked ocean glittering in the sun ; then the coast of France rose above the horizon, Toulon harbour, as might be expected, coming prominently forward in the picture ; then the vine-clad hills and fertile plains, the populous cities and picturesque villages of the interior spread themselves out like a panorama ; and finally the northern sea-board, the English Channel dotted here and there with white gleaming sails, the chalk cliffs of old England, the Hampshire downs, and my dear old home with all the loved familiar faces appeared, and I heard them speaking lovingly of poor absent me.

Then with a suddenness that was absolutely painful all these pleasant fancies passed away, and I imagined myself to be a disembodied spirit floating helplessly in the midst of immeasurable space, enveloped in murky clouds and thick darkness, and whirled hither and thither at the mercy of a furious wind.

Of course I had no idea of the actual passage of time during this period of delirium, but it seemed that I had thus been the sport

of the elements for countless ages, when the sensation gradually passed away, and I sank into a condition of complete unconsciousness.

When I awoke daylight was just making itself visible through the canvas sides of the tent, and overpowering the feeble glimmer of a small lamp which hung suspended from the pole. I remained motionless for some little time after I had opened my eyes, trying to remember where I was, and what had happened, and then wondering in a vague speculative sort of way who and what was the strange being who appeared to govern the reckless band of outlaws into whose hands I had fallen. I thought at first that I was alone in the tent, but a restless movement on my part undeceived me.

A cool soft hand was laid upon my forehead, and the voice of my hostess inquired in gentle tones whether I felt better.

I replied that I did, but complained of thirst, upon which there was a faint rustle, followed by a gurgling sound, and then the beautiful unknown, kneeling beside me, raised my head and presented to my lips a brimming goblet containing a draught of very peculiar taste, but cold as ice, and, oh ! so refreshing. I drained it to the last drop, and asked for more, which was given me. I was then advised to lie down, and sleep once more.

It was evening when I next awoke, and on opening my eyes I felt more bewildered than ever.

I was stretched upon a luxurious bed, the four slender posts of which were elaborately carved into the semblance of palm-trees, the graceful foliage forming the canopy ; the stems and leaves of the trees being richly gilt. The bed was draped with heavy silken hangings overlaid with magnificent lace, and the linen was pure, white, and fresh as new fallen snow. This bed occupied one end of a lofty room of moderate size.

A massive cornice ran round the room, and was supported by decorated pilasters, which divided the walls into compartments. A coved ceiling sprang from the cornice, and both ceiling and walls were decorated with paintings, in distemper, of mythological subjects ; the lower portion of the wall, however, having what is, I believe, termed a dado, ornamented with a diaper pattern, each square of which contained a conventional representation of a different flower.

The end of the room facing the bed was almost entirely occupied by a large bay-window draped with heavy curtains of silk and lace, matching the hangings of the bed. There was not much furniture in the room ; an elegantly-appointed toilet-table, a couch, and one

or two chairs being all that it contained, as far as I could see. One of the casements of the window was open, and through it there stole into the room a cool gentle breeze laden with sweet odours which evidently had their origin in some contiguous garden. A hilly and heavily-wooded landscape was visible through the window and beyond all was a sky glowing with the thousand evanescent beauties of a gorgeous sunset.

I lay for some time enjoying the magnificent spectacle before me, and wondering in a feeble sort of way how much of my present and recent experiences was real, and how much was due to the delirium through which I was conscious of having passed. Were my present surroundings, for instance, real, or was I simply dreaming a vivid dream? And had I really been present in the body at that bandit camp, or was it only fancy? The present appeared to be a waking reality, and so had the other, yet both experiences seemed so strange that I knew not what to think.

Upon one point, however, I did not long remain in doubt ; whatever else might be fancy, the sensation of hunger soon forced itself upon my notice as a most prosaic and undeniable fact, and I very speedily decided that I ought to make somebody acquainted with it.

I glanced round the room in quest of a hand-bell or some other means of attracting that somebody's attention, and, seeing nothing of the kind, made a move with the intention of getting out of bed to reconnoitre, but fell back, weak and helpless as an infant. My movement, however, was not without result, for there was a sudden stir behind the curtains ; a black-eyed, dark-skinned damsel emerged from her place of concealment, looked in upon me, uttered an ejaculation in what I imagined to be Italian, and forthwith beat a hasty retreat, notwithstanding my feeble hail for her to remain.

She returned, however, in two or three minutes, accompanied by, without exception, the most lovely being it has ever been my happy lot to behold. It was a young girl in her thirteenth year, as I subsequently learned, though I should have supposed her to be quite sixteen.

She was of about medium height, and her exquisite figure was already assuming the rounded graces of budding womanhood. Her skin was a clear pale olive with just the faintest and most delicate tinge of colour in the velvety cheek ; her face was a perfect oval, and her small exquisitely poised head was covered with a wealth of soft, silky, chestnut hair, so dark as to appear black in the shade, but when a ray of light fell upon it, the rippling ringlets revealed the full beauty of their deep rich colour. The

eyebrows and long drooping lashes were of the same colour as her hair, and her eyes—well, they were deep hazel ; but it was impossible to ascertain this until after repeated observations—they glowed and sparkled to such a bewildering extent. Add to this a mouth “shaped like Cupid’s bow” with full rich scarlet lips, just parted sufficiently to permit a glimpse of the small regular pearly teeth within, a small round deeply-dimpled chin, an ivory-white neck and shoulders, upon which the delicate head was set with fairy-like grace, and you have as accurate a portrait of this dainty beauty as it is within my poor power to paint.

She approached the side of the bed, and, looking inquiringly in my face for a moment, said in excellent English,—

“I congratulate you, sir, on your recovery from that terrible fever. I am glad—oh ! so very much, and so will be the count, my father, when he returns. He has been obliged to go away on important business, and will not perhaps be back for a day or two. But you are in excellent hands ; old Maria, my nurse, is a skilful leech, and Angela here and I have been able to watch beside you, if we could do nothing more. Now, tell me, are you hungry ? You should be, for you have taken nothing except Maria’s horrid medicine for two whole days, and how long before that I know not. Now, however, nurse has something more palatable for you ; she said you would awake soon and be better, and she has made you some excellent broth. Shall she bring it up ?”

“By all means,” I replied. “I am so weak with hunger, or something, that I seem scarcely able to speak. But before we do anything else, allow me to ask where I am, and to whom I am indebted for so much kindness. The last thing I remember was that I was in camp with—”

“Bell’ Demonio,” she interrupted. “Yes, she brought you to us two days ago. You were then very ill indeed, and Bell’ thought you ought to have better nursing than she could give you. It is all quite right ; you are in the Chateau Paoli belonging to my father, Count Lorenzo di Paoli ; I am his only daughter Francesca, and this is my foster-sister Angela. Now you must talk no more for the present, but take the broth like a good boy which I shall bring you.”

So saying, she tripped away out of the room, returning again in about ten minutes, accompanied by an ancient and inexpressibly ugly female, who, I was duly informed, was the before-mentioned Maria.

This antique dame felt my pulse, laid her hand upon my brow, put a few questions to me through the medium of her young mistress,

and finally pronounced that I was very much better, that the fever had left me, and that all I should be likely henceforth to require would be careful nursing and judicious nourishment. A sample of the latter, she intimated, would be found in the substantial basin of broth which was now placed before me, and which I was to be sure and consume to the last drop.

I had not much difficulty in effecting a satisfactory disposal of the meal, and when I had finished, my wounded arm was carefully dressed afresh, and, to finish off with, I enjoyed as copious an ablution in deliciously cold water as circumstances would permit ; after which I was left to myself with imperative orders to go to sleep again as soon as possible. I passed a most comfortable night, sleeping pretty soundly until broad daylight, when I awoke to find myself very much better in every respect, and, not to weary my readers, I may say in a word that from that time my improvement in health was both rapid and regular.

While partaking of a light breakfast on the morning following my return to consciousness, my lovely young hostess informed me joyously that her father had unexpectedly returned very late on the previous night, and that he proposed paying me an early visit, if I felt strong enough to see him.

I gladly assented to this proposal, for it suddenly flashed across my mind that though by a series of accidents I had almost without an effort of my own reached the place of my destination, my mission was still unaccomplished ; my bag, containing the all-important despatches, being liable to discovery by the first visitor to the old hut, if indeed it had not already been discovered ; and the only chance which now remained of its recovery was to describe as well as I could to the count, the place of its concealment, and request him to despatch a trusty messenger forthwith in quest of it.

Accordingly, as soon as breakfast was over, my wound dressed, and my toilet attended to, the dark-eyed Angela was despatched with a message to the count that I should be happy to see him as early as might be consistent with his own convenience. A few minutes afterwards he presented himself, and the ancient Maria, who had mounted guard over me in the interval, was dismissed.

Count Lorenzo di Paoli was a fine, stalwart, soldierly-looking figure of a man, dark-complexioned, and with a noble cast of countenance which accorded well with his stately carriage and demeanour.

His features were stamped with an expression of stern gravity and melancholy, which impressed me greatly at this, my first inter-

view with him, and which I could readily account for when I learned, later on, the tragical fate of his lovely young wife many years before.

He greeted me with grave cordiality, expressing his deep regret "that I had received so rough a welcome to the country which my presence had been intended so signally to benefit, and hoping that he and his household would prove able to efface the unfavourable impression which I must have received."

Of course I replied in suitable terms to this polite speech, expressed my gratitude for the extraordinary kindness which I was receiving under his roof, and then begged him to favour me with particulars of the circumstances under which I had become an inmate of his establishment.

"Certainly I will," said the count. "Your curiosity is quite natural, and, apart from that, there are doubtless matters connected with your visit to this island, which are at present causing you no small share of anxiety. Before I say more, however, let me give you the assurance that, excepting for the unfortunate adventure in which you received your wound, everything has gone right; the despatches and other papers of which you were the bearer have duly reached my hands; I have accomplished the first and most difficult part of my mission, and the papers are now accomplishing theirs. You may rest satisfied therefore that your difficult and dangerous task has been successfully achieved, and you have now nothing whatever to do but recover your health at your leisure. I trust it is not necessary for me to say that the longer you are able to remain with us, the greater will be our gratification."

He then proceeded to narrate the circumstances under which I had been brought to the chateau; the details of which, however, I shall reserve for the next chapter.





CHAPTER XIV.

AT THE CHATEAU PAOLI.

TO-DAY is Wednesday," commenced the count. "On Sunday evening last, just as it was growing dusk, I was informed that Bell' Demonio requested an audience on a matter of great import. I accordingly descended to the library, into which this extraordinary woman had been shown, and on inquiring the nature of her business she informed me that on the previous Wednesday—a week ago to-day, in fact—a detachment of her band had attacked and destroyed a party of French troops, who had with them as prisoner a young Englishman—yourself of course. She stated that in the attack you had unfortunately been wounded, and your wound having been left unattended to for some hours, fever had set in. She nursed you as well as she could up to Sunday, when finding that no improvement in your condition took place, she grew alarmed, and having learned from your disjointed ravings that you had some business with me, determined to come on to the chateau and request that I would take you under my care. I of course assented at once, and in a couple of hours more you were brought here, strapped to a stretcher—that being the only way in which you could be kept sufficiently quiescent to prevent irreparable injury to your wounded arm.

"Circumstances did not permit of my sending into Ajaccio for a physician, but most fortunately my daughter's old nurse Maria is well skilled in matters relating to medicine and surgery, and her services were at once called into requisition. She soon discovered that the unskilful treatment of your wound was the chief cause of your illness, and with infinite difficulty, for you were very violent, we succeeded in getting the limb reset, and the wound properly attended to. This done, the fever soon yielded to the influence of the medicines which the good soul administered with rigorous punctuality. In the meantime, however, you spoke several times about certain papers concerning which you seemed to be singularly anxious, and at

length by patiently listening to your rambling utterances we were enabled to make a shrewd guess as to their whereabouts. I set out in search of them, and discovered your bag, with the papers intact, safely concealed beneath a pile of brushwood in the corner of the old hut on the moor."

"Then I have been ill a whole week?" I exclaimed in considerable dismay.

"Exactly so," replied the count. "How long did you imagine your illness had lasted?"

"About two days," I replied.

"Well, it is just a week," remarked the count. "I hope you are not in any very serious hurry to leave us. In the first place I doubt whether Maria will consent to your rising from your bed for at least another week, and after that you will be some time regaining a sufficiency of strength to enable you to travel, and in the next place I am anxious to cultivate the acquaintance of one who has done so great a service to us Corsicans."

"You are extremely kind, count," said I, "and under other circumstances there is nothing I should like better than to remain your guest as long as I could find a decent excuse for so doing; but my ship, the 'Juno,' has gone to the north end of the island, where we all expect there will be some very smart work shortly, and I would not miss being with her for anything I could name."

"Ha, ha! not very complimentary to us, eh, Francesca?" laughed my host. "This young fire-eating English sailor-officer would rather be where his brains would be ever in jeopardy than enjoying the *dolce far niente* up here among the hills. What very pugnacious animals you Englishmen are, to be sure!

"But do not fear, my dear boy, nothing will be done there yet for a little while, and, if you take great care of yourself, it is quite possible you may yet be able to rejoin the 'Juno' in time to get your full share of the hard knocks to be had there, and which will doubtless be plentiful enough to suit even the most impetuous of your countrymen."

"Which do you think will be my quickest way to rejoin my ship, when I am able to do so—by land, or by water?" I inquired.

"By water, I should say, certainly," replied the count. "The entire island is in a perfect ferment, and you would find travelling by land a slow and wearisome as well as a highly dangerous process. We are perfectly quiet here, it is true, our situation being an isolated one, and in the very heart of the hills; but in and about all the towns the French troops literally swarm, while the woods and more

secluded villages are haunted either by bands of Corsican insurgents or banditti, both of which would be likely to regard a stranger with as much suspicion as the French ; and although you might be able to travel for a few miles to the northward from here in comparative safety, you would find your difficulties increase with every additional mile of your advance. And it is only fair to mention that I cannot assure you of absolute safety even here. I have reason to believe that I am very strongly suspected by the French of being favourable to the insurrectionary movement now in progress—as indeed I may admit to you that I am, my brother being in command of the insurgents—and I feel sure that, could a particle of direct evidence be secured against me, my arrest would instantly be attempted. This I should stoutly resist in the present condition of affairs, as my life would not be worth a moment's purchase were I to fall into the hands of the enemy ; but it is very doubtful whether the chateau could hold out beyond an hour or two against a determined attack, every man I could possibly spare being away with my brother."

"Would not your own countrymen help you in such a case ?" I inquired.

"There is no help available, except that of the banditti," replied the count, "and, with the single exception of Bell' Demonio's band, I would almost as soon throw open my gates to the French as to them. If Bell' were at hand at such a time, we should be perfectly safe, but one can never tell where she is to be found ; her movements are as uncertain as those of the wind, and it is quite probable that she is now at the north end of the island, co-operating with my brother."

"Who is this Bell' Demonio ?" I inquired. "Is it possible she can be the beautiful woman I saw in the camp to which I was taken after being wounded, and where I fell ill ?"

"The same," answered the count. "She is the leader of the band into whose hands you fell. Poor soul ! her story is a very extraordinary as well as a very terrible one ; the mere mention of her name is sufficient to excite a Corsican to frenzy at the remembrance of her wrongs."

"Six months ago Isabel di Solzi was one of the happiest girls in all Corsica. Her father, Count Robert di Solzi, a descendant of the most ancient and most distinguished family of all the Corsican nobility, idolized her, and gratified her every whim, no matter how extravagant it might be, and she ruled the chateau as its absolute queen."

"Her lover, as handsome and gallant a young fellow as maiden

could wish, doted upon her, as a matter of course, and she returned his love with all the passion of her fiery and enthusiastic nature, and the prospect before her seemed to be one of almost perfect human happiness.

“Her father, fond as he was of her, and reluctant as he was to part with his only daughter, nevertheless viewed the match with unqualified favour; the proposals had been formally made and accepted; the preliminaries were all arranged, and the marriage was fixed for a certain day.

“Time passed on, slowly enough, we may be sure, to the impassioned lovers, and at length the day arrived on the morrow of which the wedding was to take place. Isabel’s lover rode out early to the chateau, ostensibly for the purpose of concluding the last trifling arrangements connected with the ceremony, but doubtless it was in reality to enjoy one more interview with his inamorata before the performance of those holy rites which were to make her his for ever. The Count di Solzi was absent when he arrived, and the young couple, anticipating no evil, wandered away from the chateau, and at length in their preoccupation entered a wood through which runs the road from Ajaccio across to the eastern side of the island. They sauntered along this road for a considerable distance, when they heard the tramp of a party of soldiers behind them, and looking back found themselves in the presence of a detachment of French infantry.

“There was a great deal of ill-feeling existing even then between the Corsicans and the French, though it was not of course anything like what it is at present; hostilities had not as yet broken out; the flame which is so fiercely raging to-day throughout the island being then no more than a smouldering spark.

“Still, the *rencontre* was disagreeable, and to shorten it as much as possible Isabel and her lover turned back with the intention of passing the French in the opposite direction. But by the time that they had resolved on this, the French were upon them, and instead of courteously permitting them to pass, the officer in command ordered them to halt and give an account of themselves.

“They had of course no option but to obey, which they did. The French officer, however, either doubted, or affected to doubt, their story, and announced his intention of taking them both as prisoners into Ajaccio.

“Isabel’s lover remonstrated, entreated, and threatened by turns, in vain; and at length the officers, turning from him, began to assail the trembling Isabel with jests of the coarsest kind. This was

more than the hot Corsican blood could endure, and suddenly breaking from his guard, the frantic lover rushed upon the commanding officer, who seemed to be the chief offender, and with a single blow struck him senseless to the ground. The next moment he would have been impaled upon the bayonets of the soldiery, had the other officers not interfered ; they knew their chief, and knew too that they would never be forgiven, did they not preserve their victim for a punishment to be inflicted by himself.

“A halt was immediately called, they being at the time in perhaps the most lonely part of the road. A strong guard was placed over the prisoners, the rest of the men piling their arms, and vigorous efforts were at once proceeded with for the restoration of the injured officer.

“The injury being slight, they were soon successful, and a mock drum-head court-martial was then instituted, by which the male prisoner was tried and convicted ; sentence was passed, and the ruffianly band at once proceeded jeeringly to carry it into execution. The unhappy lover was stripped and firmly bound to a tree ; the shrieking Isabel was then dragged before him, and in her presence he was scourged to death with the soldiers’ belts. The miserable girl was then released, the troops shouldered their arms and marched merrily away, safely reaching in due time their barracks in Ajaccio.

“Meanwhile the day passed on ; Count Robert returned to the chateau, and as was his custom at once sought his daughter. Failing to find her, he made inquiry among the servants, and then learned that the lovers had left the domain some hours before. This intelligence made the count somewhat uneasy, and remounting his horse, he set out in quest of the truants upon the road which he learned they had taken. He penetrated the forest for some distance, and at length was startled by hearing shrill screams of maniacal laughter.

“Imagine if you can his horror and distress, when, on reaching the spot from which the sounds proceeded, he discovered his daughter seated upon the ground, with her dead lover’s head upon her lap, uttering peal after peal of blood-curdling laughter, as she strove to bind up the bruised and lacerated body in strips of linen torn from her own clothing.

“On approaching her, the poor girl appeared to recognize her father in a confused sort of way, and with a little difficulty he at length persuaded her to allow him to lay the murdered man across the horse’s back, and to accompany him home.

“It was of course patent to the distracted count that a fiendish

atrocities of some sort had been committed, but it was quite impossible to gather any particulars or even the most meagre hint from the poor demented girl by his side ; he therefore made the best of his way back to the chateau, whence immediately upon his arrival he despatched a couple of mounted servants—one of whom had charge of a note conveying a hint of the catastrophe to the friends of the murdered man, while the other had instructions to find and bring back with him to the chateau the first medical man in Ajaccio. By nightfall the chateau was full of self-invited guests, attracted thither by the rumours which had reached their ears concerning the events of the day, and all sorts of surmises and suggestions were made as to the probable perpetrators of the outrage. The doctor, too, as well as the friends of the murdered man, was there, and the former had on seeing his patient lost no time in administering a powerful opiate with the object of procuring for the unfortunate Isabel a temporary relief from the unnatural excitement of her overtaxed brain.

“When at length the drug had done its work, and the poor girl lay stretched upon her bed in a state of unconsciousness, a general consultation was held, at which it was resolved to spare no pains to discover and punish the authors of so atrocious a crime, and with this understanding the visitors on the following morning departed on their several ways.

“For days the efforts put forth to discover the offenders resulted in a complete failure, and in the meantime poor Isabel lay tossing restlessly with brain fever. At length one night an intoxicated French soldier blurted out the secret in the hearing of every one of the occupants of the tavern, and a little judicious questioning, mingled with occasional expressions of incredulity, extracted from the fellow the full details of the crime. These were promptly communicated to Count di Solzi, who immediately called upon the officer who had been named as the chief culprit, and taxed him with it.

“The wretch scornfully admitted his share in the outrage, and scoffed at the agonizing grief of the poor old man. A challenge followed, as a matter of course, and a meeting was arranged for the following morning ; but when that morning dawned, the French officer was found dead in bed, stabbed to the heart. The count was immediately arrested on suspicion of being the assassin, and though all the neighbouring nobility knew the charge to be as monstrous and ill-founded as ever was brought against mortal man, and did all that lay in our power to have the matter properly investigated—and though soon after his arrest one of his own

servants came voluntarily forward and confessed that it was he, and not his master, who had done the deed—poor Isabel's father was summarily tried, sentenced, and hanged over the gate of his own chateau.

“This act of base and cruel injustice, coupled with the previous outrage, caused the smouldering spark of discontent and disaffection to blaze forth at once into a devastating insurrectionary flame.

“The most ruthless reprisals were forthwith resorted to on both sides ; assassination, secret and open, became the order of the day ; the Corsicans flew to arms, and the struggle commenced which is now being waged, and which can never end until the hated French have been extirpated from off the face of the island.”

“And how fared the unhappy Isabel meanwhile?” I inquired.

“She was on her father's arrest brought here at the imminent risk of her life,” replied the count, “and while she still lay delirious, her father's execution took place ; the chateau was then sacked, and when the soldiers had loaded themselves with every article of value which it was possible for them to take away, they set fire to the place, and, driving back at the point of the bayonet all who approached for the purpose of extinguishing the flames, stood by until it was burned to the ground. It was late at night before all was done, and the officer in charge of the troops who had carried through this shameful deed of murder and spoliation was imprudent enough to camp for the night close to the scene of the outrage. Sentinels were duly posted, and everything was, as this man thought, made perfectly secure ; but he was fatally mistaken. The sentinels were surprised in detail, and despatched without having had an opportunity to give the alarm, and then a band of upwards of 100 armed Corsicans stole in upon the defenceless camp and slaughtered every one of the sleeping Frenchmen—not one survived to tell the tale.

“Isabel, contrary to expectation, rapidly recovered both her health and her reason ; but it soon became apparent that a terrible change had been wrought in her, though *how* terrible we did not realize until afterwards.

“Of course it was not to be expected that a girl who had passed through what she had would ever be the same again, but there was a change in her, apart from what might reasonably have been expected under the circumstances. Her reason appeared to be completely restored ; she talked calmly and rationally enough upon all subjects, not excepting even her misfortunes ; but there was a coldness and reserve about her, even with us, her most intimate

friends, which we found it very difficult to understand. At length one day we missed her, and apprehensive of a recurrence of the temporary aberration of intellect from which she had so recently recovered, we searched for her in all directions for three whole days without success, at the end of which time we received a note from her, thanking us for what she was pleased to term our great kindness, and informing us that she had taken steps to carry out the sole purpose of her future life, which was vengeance upon the authors of her wrongs, and the enemies of her country. We knew not what to make of this statement at first, but we soon afterwards learned that it meant she had formed a guerilla band at the head of which she had placed herself—the avowed object of which is war to the knife with the French, as long as any of them remain in Corsica.

“And most terribly has she carried out her purpose so far, for already nearly 300 Frenchmen have perished upon the weapons of her band, and fourteen French officers have met their deaths at her own hands.

The adoption of so vindictive a purpose has gained for her the title of Bell' Demonio, a title which she has accepted as perfectly appropriate, and as indicative of the relentless vengeance which her enemies may look for from her.”

“What a terrible history of wanton wrong and of merciless retribution!” I exclaimed, when the count had finished his narrative “It is horrible to think that beings claiming to be civilized can be capable of such monstrous deeds, but it is so, as I can testify from the conversation of the Frenchmen who took me prisoner, and by the bye that reminds me that *you* were the subject of their remarks. Have you any reason to suppose yourself in any sort of danger?”

“Well, no,” replied the count; “I should scarcely say that I consider myself in absolute *danger*; of course it is only reasonable to suppose that, since my brother has placed himself at the head of the insurgents, I should be regarded with a certain amount of suspicion; but that occasions me no anxiety whatever, for I have no one about me but those whom I can implicitly trust, and even to them I confide no more than I can possibly help, so I think I may say I am reasonably safe from betrayal. At the same time I omit no precaution, because I have strong reason to suppose that my actions are being watched, as I believe I have already mentioned. But perhaps you will favour me with a recapitulation of the remarks made by the French concerning me? I have hitherto had no means of ascertaining exactly in what estimation they hold me,

and any light on the subject would be especially valuable just now."

In accordance with this request, I related the substance of the conversation which had occurred among the Frenchmen while I was being conveyed toward Ajaccio. The count listened intently, never interrupting me once, but I could see by the expression of his features how powerfully he was moved, especially by the remarks which had reference to his daughter. When I had finished—

"Thank you signor—how shall I call you?" said he.

"My name is Ralph Chester," I replied.

"I thank you sincerely, Signor Ralph, for the very valuable information which you have afforded me. It gives to my position an altogether new and somewhat alarming aspect. It is true that I am safe, so far as the papers which you brought are concerned; they are out of my hands, and, even if discovered, contain nothing which could possibly compromise me; but what you have just told me appears to indicate a decided *desire* on the part of the French to find some excuse for molesting me. Personally, there is nothing I should like better than an opportunity for holding the chateau against an attack from the French. I hate them with a deadly hatred—heaven knows it is not without ample cause!—but if the day were to go against us, I shudder to think of the inevitable fate of my darling child. But, signor, she should never fall into their hands alive. I would rather blot out her innocent young life with these unarmed hands than leave her alive at the mercy of those fiends. I have already told you somewhat of what they can do, but they are capable of even greater refinement of cruelty than that which poor Bell' Demonio experienced at their hands. I am glad to have heard what you have just told me, but it greatly increases my anxiety; could I only place Francesca in safety it would not greatly matter, but as it is—yes, I must endeavour to find a secure retreat for my child, or I shall have no further peace of mind. The more I think of it the clearer does it become that the chateau is no longer a fit place for her."

We conversed for some time longer, and then Maria made her appearance, and, with the licence of an old servant, unhesitatingly expressed her conviction that I had conversed far more freely than was at all good for me in my feeble condition, and asserted decidedly that unless I were at once left for the rest of the day in perfect quiet, the direst consequences would surely follow. Upon this the count abruptly took his departure, with an elaborate apology for what he chose to term his want of consideration.

For the remainder of the day a strict embargo was laid upon my room by that stern old disciplinarian, Maria, and on the following day the count was only permitted to enter for the purpose of making a few brief but kind inquiries as to my progress.

I spent the time chiefly in meditating upon the charms of the count's lovely daughter, and in hoping for the happiness of a visit from her ; but to my intense disappointment she remained invisible. Maria mounted strict guard over me, and when circumstances necessitated her absence, the dark-eyed Angela was called in to relieve the watch.

The latter was evidently willing enough to chat with me, but it soon became apparent that she had received her orders from Maria, and that she entertained too wholesome a dread of that individual lightly to disobey her. Under these circumstances the time dragged on wearily enough, so that when on the fourth day I received permission to rise from my bed and change my room for an hour or two, I regarded the inflexible Maria with feelings of gratitude almost akin to love.

The experience of a sick-bed is unfortunately so little a rarity that most of my readers will be able to realize for themselves the delight with which, after a refreshing toilet, and clad in the easiest as well as the most gorgeous of dressing-gowns, I passed out through the door of the sick-room. The sprightly Angela was my guide, and also to a great extent my support, as we passed down a short corridor and turned into a small but elegantly furnished room

single glance round which was sufficient to assure me that I was in the favoured abode of beauty. A table littered with a variety of those flimsy trifles which ladies are wont to dignify with the name of "work" occupied the centre of the room. a harp stood in one corner and a guitar in another, an easel supporting an unfinished sketch in water-colours stood by one of the two windows which lighted the room, and a small bookcase filled with elegantly-bound books occupied a niche in one of the walls. A tiny riding-gauntlet of embroidered leather trimmed with lace, and a gold-mounted riding-switch lay upon a most inviting-looking couch. while an open book, placed face downwards, occupied a low-seated reclining chair, which faced the other window ; some small but choice water-colours graced the walls, and against that which faced the windows stood a small chamber organ. In addition to these evidences of taste and luxury there were a few small but exquisite statuettes supported on wall brackets ; delicate alabaster vases of choice and sweetly-scented flowers, and a cage of gaily plumaged birds.

"There!" said my guide, as she deposited me in the most comfortable chair in the room, "is that to your liking, signor?"

"Perfectly," I replied. "But see here, Angela, have you not made some mistake? Was it understood that I was to occupy this room? If I may hazard a guess, I should say it is your mistress's own especial apartment, the one to which she retreats when she desires strict privacy."

"You are quite right, signor, it is my lady's boudoir, but the count's instructions were that you were to be taken to the most comfortable room in the chateau; and though there are many larger and more grand, I know of none where you would be quite so comfortable as in this."

"I have no doubt you are perfectly right, little one," said I; "but I greatly fear that in taking possession of this apartment I shall be intruding—"

"It is very unkind of you to think any such thing, signor; no one who has suffered as you have in the cause of my countrymen could ever be deemed an intruder in *any* of the apartments of the Chateau Paoli," said a clear, silvery voice behind me. I turned and saw that the owner of the apartment had just entered at the open door in time to hear my remark.

The beautiful girl looked more lovely than ever, I thought, as she somewhat shyly congratulated me on the progress I had made toward recovery.

She playfully scolded the unabashed Angela for not putting the room in somewhat better order before introducing me to it, apologized for the state of confusion which it was in, and finally asked me if she could do anything to add to my comfort. With all the boldness of a British midshipman, I at once replied that my comfort and happiness would be complete if she would but condescend to favour me with as much of her society as possible.

The dear girl blushed, laughed, called me a bold boy, and then, at my earnest request, placed herself in a chair near me, and, after a slight pause of embarrassment, commenced a conversation, the theme of which was the struggle upon which the Corsicans had just entered.

This, of course, was all very well and highly interesting; no one could have looked at and listened to so lovely a creature unmoved as she descanted in feeling language upon the wrongs from which the Corsicans had suffered so greatly at the hands of the French; but, to tell the truth, I felt just then too weak to take more than a

languid interest in the subject, it was too exciting for me in my invalid condition, besides which, I perceived that the theme was a painful one to my companion ; I therefore gradually drew the conversation into a lighter channel, and we were soon deep in the discussion of poetry, music, and painting, subjects in which we both seemed to be equally interested, and our enthusiasm upon which speedily broke down the slight barrier of reserve which had interposed itself between us at the commencement of the interview. The result was that when that objectionable old party, Maria, came to announce the arrival of the moment when a return to my own room was judged advisable, she found us both comfortably established upon the same lounge, sitting very close to each other, and deep in the beauties of a portfolio of choice engravings which rested upon our knees ; moreover, we had grown so confidential that by mutual agreement our usual formal style of address had been discarded, my young hostess promising to call me "Ralph," if I would address her as "Francesca."

From this date my progress toward perfect recovery was rapid. A few days more were passed in Francesca's boudoir, in the enjoyment of her delightful society, and then came the happy moment when supported by her arm, I was able to move slowly and for short distances about the superbly laid-out grounds of the chateau. These delightful walks, which became more extended every day, naturally resulted in the establishment of still more intimate relations between us, and in a very short time each knew all about the past history and the future prospects of the other. The latter were eminently satisfactory on both sides, for, with all the assurance of a boy and a midshipman, I speedily announced my intention of winning my post rank in the shortest possible amount of time, chiefly as a desirable preliminary to my return to Corsica for the purpose of claiming the lovely Francesca's hand in marriage.

The sweet girl laughed heartily at me, at first ; though younger than myself, she was more of a woman than I was of a man, and she assumed with me a great many of the airs of a senior ; but upon my vehement and repeated protestations of the seriousness and permanent nature of my intentions, her laughter ceased, she became embarrassed and agitated, and finally, after much pressing, assured me, her face crimsoned with blushes the while, that if I ever came to claim her, she would be mine.

Now I am quite aware that my conduct in this respect was wrong. I was too young, and my prospects were far too vague at that

time, to justify me in speaking of love to any woman, besides which, in so unceremoniously laying siege to the beautiful Francesca's susceptible heart, I might, for all that I could tell, be seriously interfering with the count's plans for his daughter's future. But at the time neither of us thought anything of this, or of any thing or being but ourselves ; we were perfectly content with the state of things as they were, happy in the present, and quite agreed as to the future, to which, however, neither of us gave a single serious thought. I do not think Francesca was to blame in the matter, she had never had a mother to teach her prudence, but *I* certainly acted very wrongly, for, though little more than a boy, I was old enough to know better.

I offer no excuse for my conduct, it was quite inexcusable, but as I am telling the story of my life, I feel that I should not be dealing fairly with my readers did I attempt to pass over my faults and misdeeds in silence.

A day or two more passed swiftly away, I was rapidly regaining strength, my fractured arm-bone had knit itself firmly together again—though of course it was still quite useless, the splints not having been removed, and the use of a sling promising to remain a necessity for some little time longer—and I was revolving seriously in my mind the question of what would be the best course to pursue in order to rejoin my ship, when a little incident occurred which immediately diverted my thoughts in an entirely different direction.

Francesca and I were sauntering slowly down the broad tree-bordered drive which led from the main road to the chateau, when a man passed us. Francesca stopped him, to ask a question or two, and to give him some directions, and I thus got a full view of his features for perhaps quite three minutes. To my intense surprise I recognized in him the individual who had betrayed me to the French troops, and who had without doubt betrayed them in turn to Bell' Demonio's guerilla band ; in a word, it was Guiseppe.

When our eyes met for the first time I saw in a moment that he not only recognized me, but also that he was most anxious to know whether I recognized him. I had it on the tip of my tongue to tax him with his perfidy, and to threaten to denounce him ; but there was something in his glance which gave me the idea that he was meditating further treachery, and I instantly decided that the most effective means to defeat his plans, if he entertained any, would be to throw him off his guard, and watch keenly the course of events ;

I therefore assumed a calmness and indifference of demeanour which I certainly did not feel, and looked at him as though I had never seen him before.

Waiting until the fellow was well out of ear-shot, I asked Francesca whether he was one of the servants at the chateau.

"Well, no," she replied, "he is not exactly that. He is merely a kind of hanger-on ; his father died in our service, and this man was, in his younger days, one of our stable-boys, but he left us about a year ago to become a wood-cutter and charcoal-burner, and since then he just comes and goes when he likes, finding board and lodging when he requires it, and giving in return any trifling services that may be required of him."

Nothing more was said about the man at that time, but I resolved to speak to Count Lorenzo about him at the first opportunity.

This presented itself the same evening, on our return to the chateau. I recalled to the count's mind the conversation which had passed respecting him among the French soldiers, and also directed his attention to the fact that the subject of my remarks had been referred to in terms which seemed to leave no room for doubt as to his treachery.

"But the individual of whom you speak was called Guiseppe, was he not?" remarked the count, when I had said my say.

"Certainly," I replied. "What is the name of this man?"

"Matteo, Matteo Bartolozzi is his full name," replied the count. "I thought there must be a mistake somewhere ; you have evidently been misled, my friend, by an accidental resemblance. Matteo a traitor ! Pardon me, my dear Signor Ralpho, but if you knew the poor fellow as well as I do, you would recognize the absurdity of the supposition. I have known Matteo all his life, and I should have no hesitation in trusting him with *anything*, ay, even with my daughter's safety."

"Heaven forbid that such a necessity should ever arise," I fervently exclaimed. "It would be better to confide her to the protection of a pack of starving wolves. I am *not* deceived by any accidental resemblance, I feel as sure of the identity of this man, whom you call Matteo, with the traitor Guiseppe, as I am of my own existence. Believe me, count, I would not speak so positively, did there exist the faintest possibility of doubt."

"But, my good sir," returned the count somewhat tartly, "I assure you that what you say is quite impossible. I repeat, I have known the man all his life, and I have done him nothing but good.

I have befriended him in a thousand ways, and I know he would lay down his life rather than bring harm to me and mine."

I saw that my efforts to undeceive the count were worse than useless, and I therefore abandoned the attempt ; at the same time his arguments utterly failed to convince me that I had been mistaken, they did not even raise the most transitory doubt in my mind ; I therefore determined to simply wait and watch the course of events.





CHAPTER XV.

A NIGHT ATTACK UPON THE CHATEAU.

FOR the next two days, matters went on at the chateau much as usual. Old Maria was as sedulously attentive as ever, her sole occupation being apparently the preparation of tempting and strengthening dishes for my consumption, and the concoction of tonic herbal medicines which she administered with relentless severity.

The weather continued gloriously fine, enabling me to be in the open air the greater portion of each day ; and although the count was absent, his beautiful daughter more than supplied his place, as far at least as I was concerned ; so that, what with judicious nursing and nourishment, plenty of easy exercise in the delicious bracing mountain air, and the delightful society of Francesca Paoli, I was rapidly gaining both in health and spirits.

On the second evening after my conversation with Count Lorenzo respecting the man whom he called Matteo Bartolozzi, Francesca and I were slowly returning to the house, after a somewhat longer walk than usual, when we were startled by the sound of a horse approaching at a rapid gallop behind us. Turning round, we saw that it was the count.

He reined up when alongside of us, and, gaily saluting us, dismounted, and walked the rest of the distance to the house with us. When we reached the broad terrace in front of the chateau, he handed over his still panting horse to one of the servants, and, placing an arm in mine, dismissed his daughter, saying he had an important communication to make to me.

The moment that Francesca was fairly out of ear-shot he turned to me and said,—

“I received about an hour ago an intimation that a party of French soldiers are on their way here, for the purpose of arresting me, on suspicion of conspiring with the insurgents against the French government, and I was also informed that authority had

been given to the officer in command to take me by force, should I refuse to surrender myself and accompany them quietly. I at once set out to return here, galloping all the way, and on reaching the cross roads about six miles from here, I saw approaching along the Ajaccio road a detachment of infantry, which I have not the least doubt is the party referred to. I have quite made up my mind not to surrender; it would be simply throwing away my life to do so with the existing state of feeling of the French towards us Corsicans. I should doubtless be subjected to the ceremony of a trial, but it would be quite a mock affair; my doom is probably already fixed. I shall therefore defend the chateau as long as its walls will hold together, and I do not quite despair of doing so successfully, although my garrison will be but a weak one—I do not suppose I can muster more than twenty people all told, and they by no means reliable if it comes to a downright hand-to-hand tussle. The question is, what are we to do with you? Should we fail, and you again fall into the hands of the French, your fate is sealed, they will assuredly hang you as a spy on the nearest tree.”

“May I venture to ask, count, what are your intentions with regard to your daughter?” said I.

He turned deadly pale for an instant, then the blood rushed furiously to his head, his face crimsoned, his eyes sparkled vindictively, and the veins of his forehead stood out like knotted cords as he hoarsely ejaculated,—

“The man who lays a hand upon her must pass over my dead body; and let me tell you, Signor Inglese, I shall not die easily; much French blood will flow before I fall.”

“Unless an unlucky bullet happens to strike you fairly in the forehead, early in the fight,” I suggested.

“And do you imagine that I shall be imbecile enough to expose myself in so reckless a fashion as to render that probable?” he returned. “No! If I fight, it will be for life, not for glory, therefore I shall take every reasonable precaution to protect my life.”

“Still,” I persisted, “in the excitement of a fight prudence is sometimes forgotten for a brief space. Would it not be advisable to take any measures that may be possible to secure a retreat, should such unhappily become necessary?”

The count made no reply for a full minute, during which we continued to pace the terrace in the deepening twilight. Then he turned to me and said,—

“I wonder whether you will understand me if I say, that, as far as I am concerned, retreat is quite impossible. If I once come into

collision with the French, I must either conquer or die; there is, for me, no middle course."

"Then that settles the question, as far you are concerned," I replied. "Is it imperative that your daughter should also die, in the event of our sustaining a defeat?"

"She must either die or fall into the hands of the French," replied the count sternly; "and with the fate of poor Bell' Demonio fresh in our memories, neither she nor I would for an instant hesitate as to which alternative to accept. I would send her away to seek shelter with some friend, but her presence, if discovered, would only compromise that friend irretrievably, as well as prove fatal to herself. Besides, to speak the truth, there is so much treachery existing among us that I dare not run the risk. If your ship were only within reach, I think I dare trust Francesca on board her; she would at least be safe from the French, and I have no doubt your captain would afford her temporary protection, until other arrangements could be made."

"That he would, I am certain," I replied eagerly, "I can certainly venture to promise so much in his behalf. Unfortunately, however, the 'Juno' is now at the north end of the island, and the only safe means—or rather the *least dangerous* means of reaching her seems to me to be by water. I have come to the conclusion that that is the way by which I shall have to go, and if you felt you could confide Miss Francesca to my protection, I should be only too happy to have the opportunity to—to—"

"Make love to her on the way, eh?" interrupted the count, with a smile. "Nay, never blush and look confused, my boy. Do you think that, because I have not seen much of you for the last few days, I am altogether blind? I know, just as well as you do, that you two children fancy yourselves in love with each other; and were you a few years older I might have somewhat to say in the matter; as it is, you are both too young for me to take any serious notice of it. However, that is not now the question. Do you really think you could safely convey my daughter to the north end of the island, and place her, not on board your ship, but in the care of her aunt, my brother's wife? You are a seaman, I know, and are doubtless skilled in your profession; but how would you proceed? It would be perfect madness to attempt engaging a vessel to convey you along the coast, the reward for delivering you both over to the French authorities would be an irresistible temptation to the fishermen or coasters."

"I should not dream of running so serious a risk," I replied. "My plan is very simple. I should make for Ajaccio, timing

myself to reach the place about two or three o'clock in the morning, seize the most promising-looking boat I could find, and make sail in her. The only difficulty would be with my wounded arm, which is at present quite useless, but I dare say—"

"If that is your only difficulty," again interrupted the count, "it may be easily overcome. I would send one of my people with you, a man whom I can implicitly trust, and who has moreover had some experience on board the small craft which trade along the coast."

"Not Matteo, I hope?" said I.

"No, not Matteo," replied the count. "You are prejudiced against him, and would probably refuse to take him. The man I am thinking of is called Giacomo—he is one of the under-gardeners."

"I should like to see the man," said I; "but in the meantime had we not better make what preparations we can to defend the chateau, as well as to secure a retreat, should such be necessary?"

"By all means," said the count. "Let us first go to the stables, and arrange the means for your escape, should it be necessary, and then we will go round the chateau together, and see what can be done in the matter of defending it."

We turned away and walked round to the stables, in which stood ten fine horses. These, the count ordered to be removed at once to a place which he called the Elfin Grotto, giving instructions that the three which were considered to be the fleetest were to be saddled and bridled ready for instant use, Francesca's saddle being required for one of them. He also hunted out Giacomo—who looked a smart honest fellow enough—and ordered him to go with the horses to the grotto, holding himself in readiness for a lengthened journey at a moment's notice, and that he was to understand he was under my immediate orders, to do whatever I might require of him.

We then retired to the interior of the chateau, to examine into its capabilities of defence, and, as much to get her out of the way as for any other reason, Francesca was directed to prepare a small package of clothing, such as would serve her for a week or so, her father informing her that it might be necessary for her to leave the chateau for a short time, and that in such an event I had undertaken to escort her to a place of safety.

This done, we made a careful examination of each floor of the building, beginning with the lowest or ground floor. The chateau was built in the Italian style of architecture, and consisted of two

wings and a lofty central tower. The windows of the lower floor reached from near the ceiling right down to the ground, and gave access, by means of a row of three steps, directly to the rooms from the broad terrace along the front. These windows were protected by strong solid shutters of oak which were arranged to be fastened on the inside with three heavy iron bars, one at the top, one half-way down, and one at the bottom. The door was a very solid and substantial affair of oak thickly studded with nails, and was so well provided with massive bolts that I felt confident of its power to resist anything except artillery. This completed the defences of the lower floor, so far as the front was concerned. The back we had very little fear about; a high and solid stone wall surmounted by a formidable *chevaux-de-frise* extending for about thirty yards from each wing, and then stretching back far enough to enclose the stables and other offices, as well as a spacious kitchen-garden. The windows of the next two floors were quite unprotected; and the count therefore gave immediate orders to have all the available beds, mattresses, cushions, &c., piled up along the lower portion of each window, just high enough to protect a person when kneeling on the floor. The grand staircase, which was the only one accessible from the front entrance, was also strongly barricaded in three or four places, a sort of breastwork being constructed on the first landing, behind which the defenders might shelter themselves from the fire of an attacking party below. This done, nothing remained but to collect the arms and ammunition, muster the attendants, and await the development of events.

We had not very long to wait. Evening had closed down upon us and deepened into night during the progress of our preparations, and the count and I were watching from one of the windows the exquisitely beautiful spectacle afforded by a clear moonrise, when we observed some moving objects among the deep shadows cast by the trees of the distant avenue, and, once or twice, the cold gleam of steel where the mellow rays of the moon penetrated through the overarching branches. Presently a small group of figures emerged from the shadows of the trees and approached along the central drive which led up to the broad expanse of flower-beds beyond the terrace. As they came nearer, we perceived that they consisted of an officer in the uniform of one of the French regiments of foot, a couple of files of men, and a bugler.

"Come," said the count to me, as soon as we had clearly made out the character of our visitors, "let us go down and see what this gentleman has to say."

We made our way down the staircase—passing through openings

which had been purposely left in the barricades, but which could be effectually closed in less than a minute—and accompanied by half-a-dozen of the most resolute and trusty of the count's people, armed with musket and dagger, emerged through the great door upon the terrace, the steps leading to which the Frenchmen were just ascending. They were allowed to fairly reach the terrace, a distance of some thirty yards or so then intervening between us and them, when the count stepped forward, and, raising his hand, cried in French, in an authoritative voice,—

“Halt ! I allow no body of armed men to approach my chateau any nearer than the spot where you now stand, without my first receiving an explanation of the reason for their presence. The officer in command may, however, come forward and state his business ; but I warn you that, if the rest attempt to approach, my men will at once fire upon you.”

The Frenchmen halted, and the officer, after apparently giving his men some brief instructions in a low tone of voice, advanced towards us, raising his shako as he joined us, and saying,—

“Have I the honour to address Count Lorenzo di Paoli?”

“I am the individual whom you name,” replied the count. “To what circumstance am I indebted for the honour of this somewhat extraordinary visit?”

“I am instructed by General Lefevre, the officer in command of the forces now stationed at Ajaccio, to request your immediate attendance before him in reference to a matter closely affecting your own honour,” replied the Frenchman.

“As I have not the advantage of General Lefevre's acquaintance, and cannot conceive what interest he can possibly have in any matter relating to my honour, you may go back to him, sir, and tell him I positively decline to accede to his request, which—to say the least of it—is a very singular one to make to a Corsican noble.”

“I regret to say that the general, anticipating the possibility of your refusal, has ordered me, in such a case, to arrest you. It is a disagreeable necessity, which I would much rather have avoided ; but you leave me no alternative. Count Lorenzo di Paoli, I arrest you in the name of the National Assembly, on a charge of conspiracy,” answered the Frenchman, stepping forward and attempting to lay his hand on the count's shoulder.

“Stand back, sir !” cried Count Lorenzo, stepping back a pace and levelling a pistol at the officer's head. “I am fully acquainted with your general's designs against me ; and I decline to walk into the trap which he has set for me. I repudiate and defy his autho-

rity, which I will resist to the death ; and you may go back and tell him so."

"Ha ! say you so ?" exclaimed the Frenchman. "Rash man, you will soon feel the power of the authority which you have so arrogantly defied, for I may inform you that I have at hand a party strong enough to *compel* your submission ; and my orders are, not to return to Ajaccio without you."

"Then go, sir, and bring up your party," retorted the count scornfully ; "and we will endeavour to give you such a reception as shall teach your general to beware how he attempts to molest a Corsican noble for the future."

The French officer bowed, raised his shako, and somewhat hastily retired, withdrawing his men from the terrace directly he joined them ; and we stood watching them down the drive, until, having reached a point about midway between the terrace and the avenue, and well out of musket-shot, the little party halted ; a bugle-call was sounded ; and we saw a large body of men deploy into line beneath the trees and advance along the drive at the double.

We then retreated to the interior of the chateau, carefully locking and barring the great door behind us ; and, closing the barriers on the grand staircase as we ascended, made the best of our way to the principal floor, from whence we had decided to conduct the defence in the first instance.

Our dispositions for the defence of the chateau were simple in the extreme. We had only the front of the house to defend, the sides and rear being protected by the high wall before referred to ; we therefore divided our little garrison into two parties, one to each wing of the building ; the count heading one party, and confiding the direction of the other to me. As our plans were complete, the count and I separated on reaching the gallery at the head of the staircase, he going to that part of the building which he had undertaken to defend ; and I making the best of my way to my own command.

On entering the saloon where my party was stationed, I at once went to the nearest window to reconnoitre. The moon was by this time riding high in the unclouded ether, flooding the scene with the soft effulgence of her silvery beams, and rendering every object which was not obscured by the black shadows of the trees as distinct as though it had been daylight. Her brilliant disc was invisible from the front windows of the chateau, she having by this time passed somewhat to the rear of the building ; and this of course gave us a very decided advantage, inasmuch as it rendered it difficult for the

attacking party to distinguish us at the windows, while they were exposed in the full radiance of the brilliant moonlight.

When I reached the window, the main body of the French had just joined the smaller party, and had been halted. They presented a formidable array, numbering, in my estimation, quite a hundred, all armed with musket and bayonet; and I thought I detected among them a small party of grenadiers. Three or four individuals, apparently officers, were standing a little distance apart from the rest, and appeared to be consulting together. They remained thus for about five minutes, when their bugler sounded a parley; and one of the officers, separating himself from the rest, advanced alone towards the chateau, displaying a white handkerchief attached to his sword-point. On seeing this, Count Lorenzo threw open the window immediately over the door, and stepped out upon the balcony, also exhibiting a white handkerchief. The officer continued to approach until he was within easy speaking distance, when he halted, and exclaimed,—

“Once more, Count Lorenzo di Paoli, I call upon you to surrender yourself. Resistance, as you must see, from the force under my command, will be quite useless, and can only result in a needless effusion of blood, which I assure you will be visited with the severest retribution. Not on you alone, but also on all those who may be taken in arms with you, will this retribution descend; for your own sake, therefore, and for the sake of the misguided men who are being tempted by your rashness to their own destruction, I ask you again, and for the last time, to yield without further resistance.”

“I have but one answer to make to your appeal, sir,” replied the count, “and it is this. I positively refuse to place myself in the power of those who have again and again proved themselves completely devoid of the principles of honour and justice. And I here and now throw off my allegiance to a country the government of which is in the hands of regicides and wholesale murderers, and declare myself to be in active sympathy with the Corsican patriots.”

“Enough, sir, and more than enough,” haughtily returned the Frenchman. “On your head must rest the responsibility for whatever bloodshed may now ensue.”

And turning on his heel, he disdainfully snatched the handkerchief from his sword-point and strode resentfully away. He had, during this brief colloquy, been covered by the muskets of the entire party under my command; and at its conclusion, though I promptly interfered, I was barely in time to prevent a volley being fired upon him. I learned afterwards that the count, knowing the

temper and feeling of his people, had, before going out on the balcony, given the most positive orders to those under his command that, whatever the issue of the interview might be, the officer was to be allowed to retire unmolested.

The attack commenced immediately upon the French officer rejoining his command, the entire force advancing at a rapid double, in order to place themselves as speedily as possible under the cover afforded by the steep slope which divided the flower garden from the broad terrace in front of the chateau. The rush was made, and the cover gained in less than a couple of minutes ; but our coolest and steadiest marksmen had already been stationed at the windows, with orders to select an individual mark and to make every shot tell ; the result was that, almost immediately upon the troops getting in motion, an irregular fire broke out upon them from the chateau ; and short as was the time occupied in making their rush, they left some ten or eleven of their number prostrate behind them.

The Frenchmen by no means intended letting us have things all our own way, however, for directly they were safe under the shelter of the slope they crept up it, and, shielding themselves as well as they could behind the massive stone balustrades bounding the terrace, opened upon us a galling and continuous fire. This fire grew hotter and hotter, until the rattle of musketry all along the front of the terrace became continuous ; the bullets pattering in showers through every window, and, in spite of our hastily arranged bulwarks, wounding more or less severely many of our people ; while the terrace itself was obscured by a thick curtain of fleecy smoke.

This had lasted for perhaps five minutes, when from my loophole of observation I descried dimly in the midst of the smoky canopy, some half-a-dozen indistinct forms hurriedly crossing the terrace toward the great entrance door of the chateau. I immediately directed the attention of my party to these men, ordering them to concentrate the whole of their fire upon them, and stop their advance, if possible, at all hazards. We were just in time. An almost simultaneous volley rang out, just as the men were getting so near the walls that they could not be aimed at without complete exposure on the part of the marksmen, and every one of them fell. A few seconds afterwards a series of sharp explosions took place, which told us that these men had been the bearers of grenades or petards with which to blow open the door. But our success had not been obtained without its price ; for three of our men were shot dead, and one more so seriously wounded that he had to retire from

the combat, in consequence of the way in which our men had been obliged to expose themselves, in order to cover the grenadiers with their muskets.

Meanwhile, the curtain of smoke which veiled the terrace was every moment growing more dense, and in a few minutes from the fall of the grenadiers it had become so thick that it was quite impossible to see what was going on outside at a distance of more than twenty feet from the windows. The fire was maintained as furiously as ever, but the bullets no longer flew so thickly about our ears ; a clear indication that our antagonists were as much blinded as we were, and were aiming pretty much at random ; as it was of the utmost importance to economize our ammunition as much as possible, I therefore directed my party to cease firing for a time, until the smoke should have cleared away a little, or, at all events, only to fire when they could descry an object at which to aim. I then went across to the other wing, to suggest to the count the adoption of a similar plan, and had just reached his side when a violent explosion occurred below us, accompanied by a sound of splitting and rending of timber, and a heavy crash.

“To the landing ! to the landing, every man of you !” shouted the count. “They have blown down the door, and nothing can now prevent their entering the house. But keep cool and steady, my men, and we may yet successfully defend the staircase. Ah ! I was just about to seek you !” he exclaimed, as his eye fell upon me. “You must fly at once ; do not delay another instant, I beg of you. You will find Francesca in the music saloon, she will be your guide to the grotto ; and as soon as you have reached it, mount and ride for your lives. Take care of her, Ralph, as you would that your own sister should be cared for ; and may God be your shield and defence in every danger ! Now go ; there is no time for further parley ; but you know all that I would have you do, and you know where to seek for the friends with whom I wish you to place Francesca. God bless you, my dear boy, and farewell until we meet again ; I have already said farewell to my daughter.”

He wrung my hand convulsively, and releasing it, fairly pushed me away from him along the corridor which led to the music saloon.

As I hurried away a loud shout arose from the hall below, accompanied by a sound as of axes and bars crashing into the barricade at the foot of the staircase ; then a rattling volley of musketry rang out from the gallery, followed by loud shrieks and agonized groans, fierce oaths, and yells of defiance ; an answering volley from below, followed by more shrieks and one or two heavy falls ; and as I rapidly increased my distance from the scene of action the

varied sounds merged into a fierce and whirling din, such as might have arisen had Pandemonium opened its adamantine gates, and poured out upon the hapless chateau a legion of destroying fiends.

On entering the saloon I found Francesca on her knees, ready equipped for a journey, and with a small gold crucifix in her hands, which she had removed from her neck. As I entered the apartment she rose to her feet, and, hastily replacing the jewel, came up to me, and, placing her hands in mine, exclaimed with quivering lips,—

“Oh! Ralph dearest, what is the meaning of all this dreadful strife, and why have they attacked the chateau?”

“I will tell you as soon as we are out of the reach of immediate danger,” I replied; “at present we have no time for anything but action, so, if you are ready, we will proceed at once.”

“I am quite ready,” she answered; “but I feel very undecided what to do. My father told me to prepare for a journey, and to be ready to leave the chateau with you at any moment, but do you think I should be justified in doing so, now that he is in such dreadful peril?”

“The peril is by no means as great as you appear to think,” said I, “and your compliance with your father’s instructions will relieve him of a very serious embarrassment; so let us not linger another moment, I entreat you.”

The suggestion that her presence might possibly prove embarrassing to her father at once decided her, and, placing her hand in mine, she said simply, “I am ready; let us go,” and moved to the door of the apartment.

We passed down the entire length of the corridor, and presently reached the head of a staircase leading to the rear portion of the house, and ordinarily used exclusively by the servants. Descending this, we traversed a short passage at its foot, and finally emerged through a door into the garden at the rear. A path closely bordered with mulberry-trees led down through the centre of this garden, passing down which we eventually reached a rustic building ordinarily used as a tool-house. Entering this, Francesca turned to me and said,—

“Now, Ralph, there is a secret door in that back wall, but I have never been through it, so I do not know its exact position. But it is opened by pressing a spring, the head of which is formed like an ordinary nail-head, differing from the others only in that it projects a little more from the woodwork than the others. Do you think you can find it?”

I ran my hand over the boarding, and soon encountered what would have seemed to any one unacquainted with the secret merely

an ill-driven nail. Pressing firmly upon this, it yielded ; a cleverly-concealed door opened and revealed a very narrow passage-like space between the wooden partition and the solid stone boundary wall of the garden. Entering this and turning my back upon the open door, in accordance with Francesca's directions, and feeling cautiously before me with my feet, I found myself standing at the head of a flight of stone steps. These I cautiously descended, Francesca following closely behind me after closing the secret door in her rear, and in a few seconds we found ourselves at the foot of the steps, and standing in an arched tunnel apparently about six feet high and as many feet wide. We then moved cautiously but rapidly forward, hand-in-hand, meeting with no difficulty or inconvenience during our passage, excepting such as arose from the mephitic atmosphere. This, however, was in itself sufficiently trying, and I was heartily glad when, after the lapse of nearly a quarter of an hour, we suddenly experienced a delicious whiff of cool pure night-air, and immediately afterwards emerged from the confined tunnel-like passage into a moderately spacious cavern, through the foliage at the mouth of which a broad patch of the luminous star-lighted sky was visible.

"Who goes there?" ejaculated a voice from a mass of deep shadow on one side of the cave.

I recognized Giacomo's voice, and at once replied, adding an inquiry as to whether he had detected any signs of the presence of the enemy in the neighbourhood of the cavern.

"None whatever, signor," he replied. "I have seen nothing all the time I have been here, and have heard nothing except the sound of distant firing in the direction of the chateau."

"Then let us be off at once," said I. "The sooner we get into the main road the less likelihood will there be of our meeting with molestation."

Without more ado Francesca was accordingly assisted by Giacomo to mount, my wounded arm precluding me from seizing that coveted privilege, after which the Corsican and I sprang into our saddles, and the cavalcade moved forth into the dazzling moonlight, taking our way over the short springy turf in a direction which enabled us to keep the chateau between us and the French, being cautious at the same time to keep as much as possible within the shadow of the trees. After travelling in this way for about a couple of miles, the chateau became entirely concealed from view by the intervening trees (though the sound of brisk firing could still be distinctly heard); I therefore sent Giacomo to the front as guide, with instructions to shape such a course as would

take us out upon the high road to Ajaccio, and ranged my own horse up alongside that of Francesca, who had behaved with admirable coolness and courage throughout the adventure, but seemed keenly distressed at the necessity which forced her from her father's side at a time of such peculiar peril to him. This feeling I at once set myself to combat, making as light as possible of the peril, and stating that the attack upon the chateau was merely a wanton outrage on the part of the French, inflicted by way of retaliation in consequence of the count's refusal to obey a discourteous summons from their general at Ajaccio. I was successful beyond my utmost hopes, my fair companion deriving from my representations a comfort and reassurance which I scarcely intended, but which I certainly had not the heart to take away again, so that by the time we reached Ajaccio—which we did without adventure of any kind—she had grown to regard the whole affair with a very tolerable amount of equanimity.

After striking the high road we performed the remainder of the journey at a foot-pace, our object being to reach the town by about one o'clock in the morning, by which time Giacomo assured me the entire inhabitants of the place would be in bed and fast asleep.

On reaching that point in the road where I had taken leave of Rawlings, the "Juno's" sailing-master, we dismounted, and turning the horses' heads homeward, after adjusting their bridles so that they would not be likely to trail on the ground or entangle their feet, Giacomo administered to each of the animals a smart stroke across the flank with his riding whip, which sent them off at a rattling gallop back along the road we had come, the man assuring me that they would be certain to keep on steadily until they again found themselves at their stable door at the chateau. We did this so as to avoid the necessity of attracting attention to ourselves by seeking stabling for them in the town at that late hour. When our steeds were fairly out of sight we resumed our way, and walked leisurely into Ajaccio, which we safely reached just about the time we had previously fixed upon as most desirable for our arrival.





CHAPTER XVI.

THE "MOUETTE," THE "VIGILANT," AND THE "REQUIN."



ON reaching the port my first consideration was to discover a suitable craft in which to make the trip along the coast to the north end of the island. When it actually came to the point I must confess that the idea of seizing and carrying off the property of somebody else was extremely repugnant to me. Still, I could see no other course open without exposing the party to imminent danger of betrayal, and I had resolved in my own mind that, since necessity seemed to point to the deprivation of some unfortunate individual of his property, the deprivation should be only temporary ; I would take the most suitable boat I could find, and when done with seek some means of returning her to her owner with a handsome sum of money as hire.

Having made up my mind so far, I took counsel with Giacomo, who knew the place well, and he immediately ran over a list of craft belonging to the port, any one of which he thought would serve our purpose passably well. In the midst of his statement, however, he suddenly interrupted himself with many objurgations upon his own stupidity, to which he added a statement that he had just that instant thought of a craft which would suit us admirably, one, moreover, which we need not distress ourselves about returning.

"That sounds rather promising," said I. "What is she, Giacomo?"

"She is a pleasure-boat measuring about fifteen tons," replied the man ; "she is a very strange-looking craft, but she sails like the wind. She is the property of one of the French officers, who built her for his own amusement."

"Then," said I, "if she is likely to suit us, we will certainly make a prize of her without compunction. Lead on, my man, and let us see if we can find her."

We went on some distance further until we came to the water-

side, not meeting with a single soul on the way, and there we helped ourselves to a rowing-boat and pulled out into the bay, where, according to Giacomo's account, we should find her if she then happened to be in port.

We pulled through a large fleet of fishing-boats, coasting feluccas, and other craft, mostly of a size ranging from two to fifty tons, and at length, just as I was beginning to think our search would be in vain, Giacomo exclaimed,—

"There she is!"

I looked in the direction indicated, and saw a long low-hulled craft, cutter-rigged, with what struck me as a set of spars altogether disproportionate to her size.

"Oh!" I exclaimed in a tone of disappointment, "*she* will never do. Why, she would capsize with half a capful of wind."

"By no means, signor," replied the Corsican. "Though you would never believe it, to look at her, she carries her canvas better and longer than any boat belonging to Ajaccio, and as for working to windward—she is simply astounding."

"If that be so," said I, "let us paddle up alongside and take a look at her."

We did so, and on a nearer inspection found her to be, according to the then prevalent ideas concerning naval architecture, quite as extraordinary as Giacomo had described her to be. She was about five times as long as she was wide, with a bow like a fine wedge, a good clean run, and very little freeboard; she was in fact a singular foreshadowing of the modern type of racing cutter, and consequently, at that date, absolutely unique.

I was rather taken with her appearance, and my curiosity, moreover, being strongly excited by the marvellous stories told by Giacomo respecting her sailing powers,—which, he asserted, he had had frequent opportunities of observing, from having been occasionally engaged to accompany her owner on his cruises,—I decided forthwith to take possession of her as a lawful prize. Mooring the boat alongside we accordingly crept softly on board, and Giacomo immediately descended into the little fore-castle to ascertain whether any one happened to be on board. The fore-castle proved to be empty, but on going down into the cabin we saw by the feeble glimmer of the cabin lamp a lad of about eighteen comfortably stretched out on the cushions laid along upon the top of the lockers.

Drawing his long knife from its sheath, Giacomo unceremoniously broke in upon the slumbers of this youth, and brandishing the gleaming blade before his astonished eyes, while admonishing

him in a fierce whisper not to utter a sound above his breath if he placed the slightest value upon his life, he ordered him to enumerate what stores there were on board, and to indicate their locality. This the lad did, leading us first to a small but well-arranged pantry, and then opening the lockers and exhibiting their contents. A brief survey was sufficient to satisfy me that the craft was amply provisioned for our cruise, and this matter being thus satisfactorily settled, we repaired to the deck and proceeded to loose the sails and get the cutter under way ; the lad whom we had so roughly aroused being persuaded by occasional suggestive exhibitions of Giacomo's knife to render his best assistance in the task.

While the two were thus engaged, I conducted Francesca below, and having indicated to her the small but luxuriously-furnished sleeping cabin of the owner, proposed that she should take possession thereof, and endeavour to recruit her somewhat exhausted energies by procuring, if possible, a few hours' sleep. I then returned to the deck, and found my "crew" in the act of getting up the anchor. This was soon done, the head-sails were trimmed, and under a gentle westerly breeze we proceeded to work out of the bay.

As the cutter had a boat of her own towing astern, I cast adrift the one we had "borrowed," and left her to take her chance of drifting ashore and finding her way once more into her proper owner's hands.

Shortly after leaving our anchorage we passed close to leeward of a long rakish-looking lateener, on board which, as ill-luck would have it, an anchor-watch was being kept. I suppose the circumstance of our getting under way at so unusual an hour must have attracted attention on board this craft, at all events the casting adrift of the shore boat had been observed ; and as we approached we were hailed from her deck with an inquiry as to whether we were aware that one of our boats had gone adrift.

"Ay, ay," replied Giacomo, "we know it ; it is all right : we shall pick her up presently, but we do not care to tack just now in this light wind for fear of—*Diavolo!* hold your tongue, you son of a boiled monkey, or I will let daylight into you on one side and out on the other."

The latter part of this speech had been addressed to our prisoner, who, encouraged by the close proximity of the two vessels, had without a sign of warning lifted up his voice and shouted with all the power of his lungs,—

"*Perfidie ! nous som—*" The remainder of the sentence had been choked back by the iron grasp of Giacomo's hand upon the lad's throat, the dagger being flashed before his eyes and the threat hissed into his ears at the same moment.

But it was enough, the mischief had been done. As we glided past the craft's stern we saw the man on watch dart to the companion and disappear, returning to the deck in less than a minute, accompanied by another individual, whose fluttering white garment sufficiently indicated that he had come direct from his berth without waiting to observe the decencies of ordinary life. He, too, hailed us, but we wasted no breath in attempting to reply, fully aware that nothing we could say would allay the suspicion which had been aroused. Instead therefore of shouting back, and possibly attracting the attention of other craft, we devoted all our energies to trimming our canvas to the best advantage, and packing upon the cutter every rag we could set.

"*Per Baccho !*" ejaculated Giacomo between his set teeth, addressing the author of the mischief, and emphasizing his remarks with a smart prod of the knife in the most fleshy part of that misguided individual's person, "I have a great mind to slash your throat open, and then launch you overboard as a breakfast to the sharks. You have drawn upon us the attention of that rascally *guarda-costa*, the captain of which will not be satisfied until he has received a full explanation of your remark. But, *maledetto !* remember this, the moment our capture seems certain I will slit you up as I would a sardine,"—appropriate gesture with the knife,—"*so if you object to being slit open like a sardine you will give me all the help you can. You comprehend ?*"

The lad comprehended so well that he was frightened half out of his wits, and went round the deck, taking an extra pull here, easing off half an inch of sheet there, shifting the water-casks, and, in short, doing all he knew to increase the speed of the cutter, glancing anxiously astern at the *guarda-costa* in the intervals, and from her to his dreaded shipmate.

Of course I am aware that I ought to have interfered and put a stop to this terrorism on the part of the hot-blooded Corsican, and I *should* have done so, had there appeared any probability of his executing his sanguinary threats ; but I had already seen enough of him to believe that his bark was a great deal worse than his bite, and so, as the prisoner had evidently got us into what might prove a very awkward scrape, I was willing that he should not be allowed to go altogether unpunished.

It was even as Giacomo had foreseen. We were scarcely a

mile from the guarda-costa when we saw her canvas drooping in heavy festoons from her long tapering yards, and by the time that we had increased our distance to a couple of miles her anchor was atrip, and she was sweeping round on her way out after us.

I called my aide aft and asked him whether he knew the craft.

"Too well, signor," he replied. "It has been my lot to be chased by her often, and many an anxious moment has she caused me. She has the name of being the fastest sailer inside the Gut, and she is the terror of every honest smuggler round the coast here."

"Ho, ho!" said I. "So that is how the land lies, is it, master Giacomo? You have been a bit of a smuggler in your time, eh?"

"Yes," he frankly returned, "and not so very long ago either. And I should have been taken to a certainty, had not a shot from one of your cruisers turned yonder inquisitive gentleman back."

"Let us hope we may meet with a similar slice of luck this time," said I. "Do you think we stand any chance of getting away from her?"

"Everything depends on the weather," was the reply. "In light winds, such as this, I have never seen anything to approach this cutter for speed; but should it come on to blow, the 'Vigilant' will run us under water."

This was a singularly agreeable piece of information to receive just at that moment, for the sky had gradually become flecked with fast-flying patches of scud, and a dark threatening bank of cloud was working up to windward. So far, however, the breeze remained light, and while we were gliding through the water at the rate of something like five knots, with scarcely a ripple under our bows to indicate the fact, the guarda-costa appeared to have little beyond bare steerage-way.

At first I was sanguine enough to hope that, seeing how we slipped away from her, the lateener would 'bout ship, and return to her moorings; but nothing of the kind: she held on like grim death, her skipper, no doubt, being seaman enough to read in the increasingly-threatening aspect of the heavens a promise that his turn should come by-and-by.

In the meantime the wind grew rapidly lighter until it became a breathless calm; and there we both lay, heaving sluggishly on the long swell, our sails flapping idly from side to side, and our bows boxing the compass.

The cloud-bank meanwhile had been steadily rising, and at length it completely veiled the sky, obscuring first the stars, and finally the moon, and enveloping the whole face of nature in a

mantle of inky blackness. So intense was this darkness that we lost sight of the guarda-costa, the land, and in fact everything save the two or three riding-lights which the more prudent of the skippers had chosen to display on board their craft in the roadstead.

A breathless hush prevailed, broken only by the loud creak of our boom and the flap of the sails. Giacomo and his shipmate, or prisoner—whichever the reader likes—were somewhere forward, probably sitting down; but it was impossible to see them in the impenetrable darkness.

I called Giacomo aft, and his voice, when he spoke in reply, sounded strange, weird, and unnatural. I considered the aspect of the sky portentous in the extreme, but I wished to have his opinion, as that of a man accustomed to the weather of that region, and I asked him what he thought of it.

"We shall have it down upon us very heavily before long," he replied; "but I do not think it will last above three or four hours."

"Then we had better bear a hand and shorten sail," said I. "You take in the gaff-topsail, and bowse down a double reef in the mainsail, and I will in foresail and shift the jib. I suppose there is a storm-jib somewhere on board?"

"Down in the locker, forward," said he. "Be careful to close the hatch securely when you come up, signor, or we shall be swamped in less than ten minutes; she will bury herself in the breeze that we are going to have."

We all three worked like Trojans, and in a remarkably short space of time had the "*Mouette*"—as I found the cutter was named—under double-reefed mainsail and storm-jib, the latter well in along the bowsprit, with topmast lowered as far as it would come, the fore-hatch and cabin skylight battened down, and everything made snug and ready for a regular stand-up fight with the elements.

While we were busy with these preparations, I admonished Giacomo to keep a smart look-out, and I was careful also to do the same myself, in case the guarda-costa should endeavour to cut matters short by sending away a boat after us; but the man assured me that the skipper of the craft knew too well what he was about to risk the loss of a boat's crew by sending them away under such threatening conditions of weather.

Smart as we had been in making our preparations, we were only barely in time. We had just comfortably completed our work, and I had established myself at the tiller, with Giacomo at the main-

sheet, and François—as the French lad called himself—at the jib-sheet, when there came a terrific flash of lightning, green and baleful, illumining for a single instant the entire scene, and revealing our pertinacious friend, the “Vigilant,” in her old berth astern, with her long tapering yards lowered to the deck, and two stumpy lugs and a pocket-handkerchief of a jib hoisted in their place. Then, as the opaque darkness closed down upon us again, there followed the long deep reverberating roll of the thunder. Another vivid flash quickly succeeded, the thunder this time being much louder and nearer; and then, after a pause of about a minute, there came a perfect *blaze* of lightning, so intensely bright that the whole atmosphere appeared for one brief moment to be literally on fire. Simultaneously with the flash came the awful deafening crackling crash of the thunder, the terrific detonations of which completely stunned and unnerved me while they lasted, so overpowering were they in comparison with anything of the kind which I had before heard. We had scarcely time to recover our hearing before we became conscious of a hissing roaring sound in the atmosphere, momentarily increasing in intensity, and, looking to windward, there appeared in startling relief against the sable background a long line of luminous milky foam rushing down toward us from the horizon. In an incredibly short time the squall was upon us. On it came, like a howling fiend, over the tortured surface of the ocean, causing it to hiss and seethe like the contents of a boiling cauldron, and striking the cutter with such resistless fury that she went over helplessly before it, burying her lee-rail so deeply in the brine that her sails lay prostrate upon the surface of the water.

Each of us instinctively shouted to the others to “hold on,” grasping at the same moment whatever came nearest. I managed somehow to clamber up the deck, as the cutter went over, and, passing out over the low bulwarks, established myself on the up-turned side of the little craft. Giacomo had done the same, while François was standing on the side of the cabin-companion, and clinging convulsively with both hands to the weather-rail.

Crawling up to the side of the Corsican, I placed my mouth to his ear and shouted,—

“Do you think you can cut away the mast?”

“No! no! no!” he earnestly returned. “See, signor, her head is paying off, and she will come up again in a minute or two; she *cannot* turn over altogether, her ballast is too well secured for that, and she will not fill even if she remains thus for half an hour yet; no water can get below except through the companion, and

the doors fit so well that very little will get down even through them. See there, she is coming up again already."

It was even so. While the man was speaking, the cutter's bows had been rapidly paying off, until we headed, as nearly as we could guess, straight for the shore; when, the pressure of the wind being no longer upon her broadside, the heavy ballast had gradually dragged the yacht into an upright position, and we had, somewhat precipitately, to scramble inboard again.

The moment that the yacht recovered herself, the wind of course caught her sails, and away we at once started to leeward with the speed of a hunted stag. This, however, would never do; the shore was straight ahead, and, at the rate at which we were travelling, twenty minutes would have seen us dashed into matchwood upon the rocks.

Very cautiously, therefore, we brought her upon a wind, and though, when we again got broadside-to, she threatened to go over once more with us, we managed by careful manipulation of the sheets to avoid such a catastrophe; and when we had got her once fairly jammed close upon a wind, some former experience of mine in cutter sailing enabled me to keep her right side uppermost. But it was perilous work for a good hour after the squall struck us. I have occasionally seen in my later days some bold and even reckless match-sailing, but I have never yet seen a craft so desperately overdriven as was, perforce, the little "Mouette" on that memorable night. While the first strength of the gale lasted we were literally under water the whole time, the sea boiling and foaming in over our bows, and sweeping away aft and out over the taffrail in a continuous flood.

I believe we should have sailed faster, and we should assuredly have made much better weather of it, had we been able to get a close reef down in the mainsail; but under the circumstances this was impossible, since, being so short-handed, it would have delayed us long enough to allow the "Vigilant" to get alongside us before we had got through with the work. There was, therefore, nothing for it, but to keep on as we were, the cutter heeling over to an angle of quite 50° , so that we were really standing upon the inside of the lee-bulwark, with our backs resting against the steeply-inclined deck, up above our knees in the sea, beneath which the little craft's lee-rail was deeply buried; while, owing to our great speed, we rushed *through* instead of riding over the sea which was rapidly getting up, so that, when an unusually heavy "comber" met us, we were literally *buried* for the moment, while it swept over us.

Luckily the first mad fury of the blast lasted only for two or three minutes, or our mast could never have resisted the tremendous strain upon it ; as it was, stout though the spar—absurdly disproportionate to the size of the craft, I then considered it—it swayed and bent like a fishing-rod, causing the lee-rigging to blow out quite in bights, while that to windward was strained as taut as harp-strings, the resemblance to which was increased by the weird sound of the wind as it shrieked through it.

Scarcely had the tempest burst upon us before the veil of cloud which had obscured the heavens was rent to shreds by its fury, the sky was cleared as if by magic, the moon and stars reappeared—the former low down upon the horizon,—and we had an uninterrupted view of the wild scene around us.

We were heading straight out from the land, and sailing so close to the wind that we were taking the seas nearly stem-on ; and I frankly confess that my heart was, metaphorically speaking, in my mouth for the greatest part of that night, while watching the little craft rush bodily into the steep slope of wave after wave, and felt her quiver like a frightened thing as they swept hissing and seething over our heads. My admiration for the skill of her builder was boundless ; for, had I not witnessed the cutter's achievements, I could never have credited the power of wood and iron to successfully resist such a terrific strain and battering as she received.

When the first wild struggle for existence was over, and we had fairly settled down to our work in that mad life-or-death race, we had time to look round and see how our opponent had come out of the struggle. We had not far to look. There she was, about three miles to leeward, and well on our quarter, dashing gallantly on ; now rushing upward upon the crest of a wave, amid a deluge of spray, and lifting her fore-foot out of the water as though about to leave the element altogether and take flight into the air, like a startled sea-bird ; and anon plunging down into the trough until only a small portion of the heads of her sails was visible. She was evidently making much better weather of it than we were ; but on the other hand half-an-hour's patient observation revealed to us the comforting fact that, notwithstanding her vaunted speed, we were both head-reaching and weathering upon her.

Satisfied at length that this was actually the case, I asked Giacomo what he now thought of our chances of escape.

"We shall get away from her," he replied exultingly. "I have no longer any fear of *her* ; what I now dread is the possibility of the cutter foundering from under us. There must be a considerable

amount of water making its way into her interior, with the sea sweeping over us thus incessantly ; indeed, I am convinced that we are sensibly deeper in the water than we were."

"Do you think you could manage to get the pump under way?" I asked.

"I would *try*," he replied ; "but the well is on the larboard side, close by my feet, and deep under water."

"Then," said I, "we must endeavour to get her round upon the other tack. We will watch for a 'smooth,' and directly it comes, you and François must round-in upon the mainsheet. Are you both ready?"

They replied in the affirmative, and after watching in vain for some five minutes, a terrific sea burst over us, burying the craft—as it seemed to me—nearly half-way up her mast, and beyond it the water was comparatively smooth.

"In with it!" I gasped, as we came out on the other side of this liquid hill. They gathered in the sheet as though their lives depended on it, and at the same moment I eased off the weather tiller-rope, and gave the craft her head. She surged up into the wind, her canvas flapping so furiously that it threatened to shake the mast out of her ; her lee-gunwale appeared above the surface, and placing my feet against the tiller I pressed it gradually over, helping her round while stopping her way as little as possible ; a sea rushed up and struck her on the port-bow, sending her head well off on the other tack, the jib-sheet was promptly hauled over, the mainsail filled, and as we hurriedly scrambled over to the other side of the deck and secured ourselves anew with lashings round our waists, the "Mouette" plunged forward on the larboard tack, looking well up to windward and heading about due north.

The fixing and rigging of the pump was a work of considerable difficulty and danger, but it was eventually done ; and then Giacomo and François, placing themselves one on each side, set resolutely to work, with the determination of not leaving off as long as a drop of water would flow from the spout.

The clear stream which gushed out as soon as the brake was set going showed us unmistakably that we had not begun a moment too soon, and had we still entertained any doubt upon this point, it would have been dispelled by the length of time it took to clear the little craft of water. It was broad daylight when at length Giacomo panted triumphantly,—

"There she sucks!"

Just before sunrise we noticed the first indications of a break in the gale, and by eight o'clock it had so far moderated that our lee-

rail was just awash, and instead of diving through the seas, as we had been ever since the gale struck us, the cutter managed to rise over everything but the heaviest. It was still too wet forward to permit of taking off the forecastle-hatch, but communication between cabin and forecastle could be effected by means of a sliding door in the bulkhead; so François was sent below with instructions to prepare a thorough good breakfast, with plenty of hot coffee—which, let me say, I have found infinitely more comforting and refreshing than spirits, after long exposure to wet or cold, or both combined.

After the setting of the moon we had lost sight of the guarda-costa until dawn once more betrayed her whereabouts. When first seen she was hull down and about three points on our lee-quarter, still under her two lugs and jib. So far, this was satisfactory; we had walked fairly away from her in her own weather, and Giacomo was in ecstasies.

“Ah!” he chuckled, “Monsieur Leroux would have almost forgiven us for running away with his “*Mouette*,” had he been here to see what a shameful beating she has given the “*Vigilant*.” The story is sure to leak out through some of the lateener’s people, and poor old Lieutenant Durand, who commands her, will not dare to show himself ashore at Ajaccio, he will be so laughed at.”

But the guarda-costa’s people had no idea of tamely accepting their defeat as final. No sooner was it light enough for them to fairly make us out, than they shifted their sails, substituting single-reefed lateens for the lugs, and taking in their storm-jib out of the way. Their increased spread of canvas soon told a tale, for before half an hour had passed it became evident that they were gaining upon us, going faster through the water, that is; but she did not appear to weather on us much, if at all. The fact that the “*Vigilant*” was overhauling us, however, gave me very little uneasiness, for I calculated that, as we were both then sailing, it would take her quite three hours to get within gunshot of us, and probably another half-hour before there would be much probability of her hitting us, and by that time I expected we should be within four hours’ sail of San Fiorenzo, where I fully expected to find the old “*Juno*,” and probably a few more of our own ships; and I thought it very doubtful whether the Frenchmen would keep up the chase so far as that, for fear of running into a trap and being themselves caught.

We therefore went to breakfast with tolerably easy minds, to say nothing of good appetites, and thoroughly enjoyed the meal,—a most sumptuous one, considering the place and the circumstances

of its preparation,—Giaccomo condescending so far to relax the sternness of his demeanour to François as to pat that individual approvingly on the shoulder, and to assure him that such cookery went far to atone for his extraordinary indiscretion of the night before.

Francesca sat down to breakfast with us, having quite unexpectedly made her appearance on deck, fresh, blooming, and cheerful, about half an hour before. To my unbounded surprise, she assured me that she had passed a very tolerable night, having indeed been sound asleep for the greater portion of the time. She had been somewhat alarmed when the cutter was thrown upon her beam-ends, but had not been in the least incommoded by the accident, nor indeed aware of its full extent, the cot upon which she was lying being a very ingenious affair, so contrived that it always maintained a perfectly horizontal position, no matter how much the cutter rolled and pitched, nor how greatly she heeled over. This was very gratifying news to me, for I fully expected to see her appear in the morning excessively frightened, and possibly very seriously bruised by the violent motion of the little craft in which she had passed so adventurous a night.

By the time that we had all breakfasted the wind had so far moderated that it became necessary to make sail upon the cutter; the "Vigilant" having crept up well abeam of us, though still hull-down and apparently close in with the land. We accordingly shook both reefs out of the mainsail, and got the foresail and working-jib set, with which canvas we rushed along in true racing style, our lee-rail well buried, and the craft taking just enough weather-helm to allow of her being steered to a hair's-breadth. Her performance perfectly enchanted me; I had never seen anything like it before, and to my unaccustomed eyes she seemed fairly to fly. Even Giacomo and François, both of whom had repeatedly sailed in her, asserted that they had never seen her do so well before.

When we again had time to take a glance to leeward at the "Vigilant," we discovered that well-named craft bowling along under whole canvas, and evidently trying her hardest to head-reach upon us. For the first half-hour we endeavoured to flatter ourselves that we were still holding our own, but at the end of that time such self-deception was no longer possible; the breeze suited us admirably, but there was still too much sea for the little "Mouette," and the "Vigilant's" superior power at length began to tell. Had they carried sail as recklessly through the night as we had, there can be no doubt they would have been alongside of us by daylight. By this time, too, we were abreast of Calvi, and were able to bear away

with a beam wind for Acciajola Point, round which, and at the bottom of the bay, lay San Fiorenzo, our destination. Our altered course gave our opponent a further advantage by bringing her a couple of points before our beam, and we had the mortification of seeing that the craft was edging out to intercept us, and would, to a moral certainty, cut us off before we could reach the headland.

Still, I resolved to stand on, and trust to the chapter of accidents for our ultimate escape. If the change in our course had given the "Vigilant" one important advantage, it had given us another, to which I attached quite as much weight; it had brought the wind and sea abeam, and permitted us to ease up our sheets, while the sea no longer retarded us: it also permitted us to set a little extra canvas, and we accordingly lost no time in getting our topmast on end and setting the gaff-topsail, after which we could do nothing but sit still and anxiously watch the result.

Meanwhile the two vessels were rapidly converging upon a point distant about a mile from Cape Acciajola. The wind continued to drop, the sea going down at the same time; and as the morning advanced and the weather became lighter, we appeared to be once more getting rather the advantage of our pertinacious antagonist. So completely was our attention engaged by the "Vigilant," that it was not until that craft had hoisted her colours that we became aware of the fact that a new actor had appeared upon the scene, and was within seven miles of us. This was a brig, which when we first caught sight of her was running in for the land from the W.S.W., with every stitch of canvas set that would draw, including lower, topmast, and top-gallant studding-sails on her port side. She lay about three points on our weather quarter, and was steering for the Gulf of San Fiorenzo.

The appearance of this stranger naturally added very greatly to my anxiety. I could not in the least make up my mind as to her nationality, for she hoisted no colours in response to the "Vigilant's" display of her ensign, and though she struck me as being thoroughly French, both in build and rig, I could not understand why she should be running for San Fiorenzo, if our fleet was there; while if it was not, it seemed pretty certain that I had run into what old Rawlings, the sailing-master, was wont to designate "the centre of a hobble," in other words—a decided predicament. How to act, under the circumstances, I knew not; I was thoroughly embarrassed.

Away to leeward was the "Vigilant," in such a position that if we bore up we should be simply running straight into her clutches; up there to windward was this mysterious brig, from which there was

no possibility of escape if we hauled our wind, while if we kept straight on we were still almost certain to fall into her hands, assuming that we were lucky enough to escape the "Vigilant." Of course there was just a bare possibility of her being English, but if so her appearance strangely belied her.

It seemed to me that the least imprudent thing to do would be to keep straight on as we were going, and this I accordingly did. I still felt very anxious to know for certain who and what this brig really was, and at last I determined to hoist the English flag over the French at our gaff-end, hoping that this signal would evoke some response; but as far as the brig was concerned it was entirely without effect.

Not so, however, with regard to the "Vigilant;" the sight appeared to greatly irritate her worthy skipper, for he immediately hauled his wind, and very soon afterwards tried the effect of his long brass nine upon us. The shot fell short some sixty or seventy fathoms, but it was well aimed, and pretty conclusively demonstrated that M. Durand was growing angry. Finding that we were as yet out of range, the lateener once more kept away upon her former course, evidently recognizing the possibility that, if she did not, we might still slip past her.

Another quarter of an hour brought us abreast of the Cape, and in about ten minutes more we had opened the town of San Fiorenzo. Well out in Mortella Bay a large fleet of ships lay at anchor, while much nearer the shore a 74-gun ship and a frigate were visible, also apparently at anchor, and briskly engaging a battery of some sort, which appeared to be built on a projecting point of land. At the same time the roar of the distant cannonade, which had been shut off from us by the intervening high land, was borne distinctly to our ears. Meanwhile the inscrutable brig had steadily pursued her course, without appearing to take the slightest notice of the little drama which was being enacted ahead of her, and now came foaming up upon our weather quarter, steering so as to shave close past our taffrail.

I had by this time lost all doubt as to her nationality, though she still kept her bunting well out of sight; she was unmistakably French all over, from keel to truck. And though she was an enemy I could not help admiring the beautiful order and neatness which characterized her appearance: two qualities which were rarely to be witnessed on board French ships at that period. I was rather surprised that she had not pitched a shot across our fore-foot before this, as a delicate intimation that the time had arrived for us to heave-to; but as she had not, I began to entertain a faint

glimmer of hope that she was engaged upon some special service of such importance that she could not spare time to interfere with us.

It was evident that she had no intention of rounding-to, for there still stood her studding-sails without a sign of any preparation for taking them in. Our attention was now of course, for the moment, given exclusively to her ; our curiosity being strongly roused as to her intentions. In another moment she swept magnificently across our stern, so closely that a bold leap would have carried a man from her weather cat-head down upon our deck ; and as she did so we became aware of sundry tanned and bearded faces, some of which seemed familiar to me, peering curiously down upon us through her open half-ports. At the same moment a dapper young fellow in the uniform of a British midshipman sprang into the main-rigging, speaking-trumpet in hand, and hailed us somewhat in the following fashion,—

“Cutter ahoy ! who are you, and whither bound ? and what is that piratical-looking craft down to leeward ? If he is interfering with you, you had better bear up and follow in my wake ; I’ll take care that—hilloa ! if that isn’t Chester may I never—ahoy ! Chester, old boy ! don’t you know *me* ?—Bob Summers, you know. Up helm, old fellow ; the “Juno” is in there, and—”

The rest was unintelligible, the brig being by this time too far away to allow of further conversation. Of course I bore up at once, for the brig being in English hands, I had no further occasion for anxiety with regard to the “Vigilant.” That craft, true to her name, had evidently been on the watch to see what would come of the meeting which had just taken place, and had already arrived at the conclusion that what had passed boded her no good, for the moment we bore up, she did the same, wearing short round upon her heel, and shaping a course, as nearly as we could judge, for Calvi. Bob, however, who was evidently burning to distinguish himself, seemed to regard this as a favourable opportunity for so doing, and promptly squared away, steering a course which would enable him to intercept the guarda-costa ; we following steadily in his wake to witness the fun. Almost immediately afterwards we heard the shrill notes of the bo’sun’s whistle, followed by the hoarse bellowing sound in which that functionary is wont to transmit the commanding officer’s orders to the ship’s company. And occasionally we were gratified with the sight of Mr. Bob Summers squinting curiously at us through his telescope, out of one of the stern-ports.

The moment that the brig was fairly within range of the “Vigilant,” Bob bowled a 9-pound shot across that craft’s fore-foot, as an invi-

tation to her to heave-to. M. Durand, however, seemed in no humour for accepting any such invitation just then, for he immediately returned a decided negative from his long brass 9-pounder, sending the shot very cleverly through both Bob's topsails, and narrowly missing the mainmast-head. I expected to see Master Bob round-to and deliver his whole broadside in retaliation—it would have been quite like him to do so; instead of this, however, he maintained a grim silence, notwithstanding that M. Durand continued his efforts to cripple the brig. At length, however, Bob got within short pistol-shot of his adversary, and then in came his studding-sails, all together, down went his helm, and *crash!* went his broadside of four 9-pounders into the devoted Frenchman, bringing his sails and his flag down by the run, together.

As the brig rounded-to, her main-topsail was thrown aback, bringing her to a standstill directly to windward of the "Vigilant," and within easy hailing distance. Then Master Bob hove into view in the main-rigging once more, still with the precious speaking-trumpet in his hand, and the guarda-costa was sternly ordered to surrender—as I afterwards learned, we being at the moment rather too far astern to hear what passed,—which she forthwith did. The cutter was thereupon lowered and manned, and a prize crew went on board to take possession, little Summers himself also going with the party.

In the meantime we in the "Mouette" joined company, heaving-to close under the brig's quarter, and making out for the first time the word "Requin" (Shark), which was painted on her stern in small red letters.

After the lapse of perhaps a quarter of an hour the brig's cutter shoved off from the side of the "Vigilant," and in another minute Bob and I were shaking hands as vigorously as though we had not seen each other for years. As soon as he had done with me, the young rascal turned to Francesca, whereupon I introduced him in due form in French. Francesca at once frankly gave him her hand, and made a pretty little speech as to the happiness which it afforded her to make the acquaintance of any friend of her "cher Ralph," &c., &c.

Master Bob, whose knowledge of French was of the slenderest and most flimsy description, was in no wise disconcerted by being addressed in what was to him practically an unknown tongue. He bowed with all the elegance and grace he could muster, smiling meanwhile as suavely as he knew how, and finally responding somewhat in this style,—

"*Je suis most happy à avez le plaisir à makez votre acquaintance,*

Mlle. Paoli. *J'ai* already *l'honneur de* being partially acquainted with *votre oncle*, General di Paoli, and a fine fellow he is. And—my eye! won't he be surprised to see you? I only wish you could stay on board *le "Juno,"* or, better still, take up your quarters aboard the brig, the skipper giving her of course to Chester and me with a roving commission. That *would* be jolly; but there—what's the use of thinking of such a thing? Of course it is ever so much too good to be true. By the way, Chester"—turning to me—"have you dined yet? Neither have I. Now suppose we all go aboard the brig then; I'll leave a couple of hands to help your crew here, and we can then make sail in company. I say, we shall present quite an imposing appearance as we bring-up in the roadstead. I expect the skipper will send for us on the quarter-deck, and thank us before all hands for our gallantry and important services."

Bob jumped into the boat alongside, as he concluded; I followed, and then Francesca stepped daintily down into the dancing craft, where the gallant Bob established her snugly in the stern-sheets, close alongside himself. He then seized the yoke-lines, gave the order to "shove off and give way" in his most authoritative manner, and in ten minutes more we were all three comfortably established in the cosy little cabin of the brig, with a very tolerable dinner on the table before us.





CHAPTER XVII.

THE CONVENTION REDOUBT.

BOB'S curiosity to hear my story was about equal to his appetite for dinner, so while we proceeded with the demolition of the comestibles, I related to him the various adventures which had befallen me since leaving the old "Juno," demanding in return an explanation of the circumstances which led to his turning up in the opportune manner related in the last chapter.

"Oh!" replied he, "I can tell you that in half-a-dozen words. When the boat returned from landing you, old Rawlings went at once to the cabin to make his report, and soon afterwards we filled away and stood to the nor'ard and east'ard under easy canvas. Then the wind fell light, and by-and-by it dropped altogether, and when daylight began to appear we found ourselves within about six miles of this brig. The skipper and Mr. Annesley both toddled up as far as the main topsail-yard to take a look at her. They were about a quarter of an hour up there, and when they came down, the first and second cutters were sent away to see who and what she was. Mr. Flinn had charge of one boat, Percival and I went in the other. We soon saw that she was French, and the lads gave a cheer and laid themselves out to race for her. Our boat was rather the lighter of the two, and Percival and I promised our people a bottle of grog if we got alongside first, in consequence of which we beat Flinn all to splinters. Seeing us walking ahead, he hailed us to keep back in line with him, which was likely, wasn't it? Oh, yes! Didn't he wish he might get it? By the time that we were within half a mile of her the brig had got her boarding-netting all triced up, guns loaded and depressed, and everything ready for a warm reception. She withheld her fire until we were close to her, intending, I suppose, to utterly demolish us just before we got alongside; but I was watching them with my telescope, and as soon as they had got their broadside carefully trained and were about to fire, we simply took a broad sheer to port, and before they

could lay their guns afresh, we were under her bows, and into her head, from whence we at last managed to hew our way in upon deck. This disheartened the Frenchmen, and they began to give way, and at that moment in came Flinn and his lot over the starboard-quarter, laying about them right and left. That settled the business; the Johnnies flung down their arms and cried for quarter, which of course we gave them.

“She turned out to be the ‘Requin,’ privateer, armed with eight long nine-pounders, with a crew of forty men in her fore-castle, and her hold crammed with the choicest pickings of the cargoes of some five or six prizes. So you see she proved to be a valuable prize herself. I was put in charge, with a prize crew of eight men, to take her into Malta; and I also carried a despatch for the admiral on the station. The old boy was as pleased as Punch, when he read the skipper’s letter, and actually invited me to dine with him that night, which you may be sure I did. He asked me a good many questions about the fight, and about the brig herself, and next day he came on board us and gave the craft a thorough overhaul. The result was, that we were ordered alongside the arsenal wharf, where we discharged the entire cargo, took in a lot of iron ballast, filled the magazine and water-casks, shipped a quantity of shot and provisions for the fleet here, added seventeen more hands to our books, and sailed again just a week ago to-day, with orders to join the fleet at San Fiorenzo and report myself to Admiral Hood, for whom also, by the way, I have a letter or despatch, or something of that sort.”

Such was the account which Mr. Robert Summers gave of himself, and upon its conclusion we adjourned to the deck.

We were by this time within three miles of the fleet, and within about six miles of the two detached ships, which were still maintaining a vigorous cannonade upon the shore battery. We brought our telescopes to bear upon these two ships, and soon had the gratification of recognizing in one of them our own dear old craft, the “Juno.” She did not appear to have received very much damage, but the other, which we were unable to identify, seemed to be very much cut up about her spars and rigging.

While still intently watching the progress of the fight, we observed a thin column of greyish brown smoke curling up into the air from the “Juno’s” consort. That it was not the smoke from her guns we could see at once by its peculiar colour. It rapidly increased in volume, and as it did so the ship’s fire slackened until it died away almost entirely. Still watching the vessel, as the smoke from her guns drove away to leeward, we saw three little tongues of flame darting out from her side.

"Tell you what, Chester !" exclaimed Summers ; " those fellows ashore are firing red-hot shot, and they've set the old barkie on fire."

Such was in fact the case, and in a few minutes we saw a signal run up to the royal-masthead of the " Victory," Lord Hood's flagship. The seventy-four immediately replied, and at once ceased firing altogether, the fire from the " Juno " also slackening somewhat. Then we saw the rigging of the two ships blacken, as the hands went aloft to loose the canvas. Rapidly, yet as steadily as though the crews were merely being put through their sail drill, the heavy folds of canvas were let fall from the yards, sheeted home, and hoisted, the head-yards were braced aback, and in another minute or two the bows of both craft paid off, and they stood out from the land, close hauled upon the larboard tack, to rejoin the rest of the fleet, our old ship delivering her port broadside, as the guns were brought to bear, by way of a parting salute.

We were by this time threading in and out among the transports on our way to a vacant berth at no great distance from the " Victory," and in about five minutes afterwards the " Requin " and her prizes came to an anchor. It was amusing enough to see Master Bob strutting up and down the diminutive quarter-deck of the brig, his telescope tucked under one arm, and the cherished speaking-trumpet under the other, issuing his orders as to the stowing of the canvas and the squaring of the yards, &c. ; but after all it was only natural : it was his first command, and he was anxious that everybody should see that he was fully qualified for it. When at length everything had been done to his satisfaction, he ordered the gig to be lowered, and, jumping into her, pulled away to the admiral's ship to deliver his despatch.

Meanwhile I amused myself by watching the seventy-four and the " Juno," as they worked up to the anchorage, and was glad to perceive that the fire which had broken out on board the " Juno's " consort had been conquered.

By the time that they had reached their berths, Bob had returned, in high feather at Lord Hood's commendations upon his conduct ; and I then joined him, leaving Francesca for the present on board the brig, while we pulled away to the " Juno," to report ourselves to the skipper.

We were received very graciously by Captain Hood, and very cordially by the rest of the officers ; so much so, indeed, that as far as I was concerned I was both gratified and moved to discover the high estimation in which all appeared to hold me.

I had only time to glance hurriedly round the decks, and to

notice that the jolly old craft appeared to have suffered but slightly in her recent engagement with the shore battery, when Captain Hood invited me into his cabin, and forthwith led the way.

I had, on reporting myself, announced to him in general terms the fact that I had accomplished my mission ; now I had of course to enter into full particulars, and give a detailed narrative of my adventures.

It was a sight to be remembered, to see the skipper open his eyes in amazement, when I described to him the particulars of my flight from the island with Count Lorenzo's daughter, winding up with a statement that she was at that moment on board the brig. He was good enough to compliment me very highly upon the zeal, courage, and discretion which I had manifested in the performance of a most important duty, and he also evinced some little concern respecting my damaged arm,—which, to speak the truth, was none the better for my experiences on board the "*Mouette*,"—sending word there and then for the surgeon to come aft and give it an overhaul ; but I could see that his curiosity was powerfully excited with regard to Francesca, and, as soon as my disabled limb had been dressed and made tolerably comfortable, he ordered his own gig to be lowered, and, requesting my company in the boat, jumped into her and was conveyed to the brig.

He evidently had as good an eye for a pretty woman as he had for a ship, and seemed immensely struck with my lady-love, doing his best to render himself agreeable, and placing the ship and all hands at her disposal. Francesca, however, young as she was, had a perfect knowledge of "the proprieties ;" she felt out of place on board ship, and clearly recognized the desirability of at once placing herself under her aunt's care : she therefore thanked the skipper very gracefully for his generous offer, and said she would merely trouble him so far as to avail herself of his aid in making her way to the quarters of her uncle, General Paoli.

This was a matter involving very little difficulty. The general had established his head-quarters in a small fishing village, about four miles from San Fiorenzo, situated on the shore of a tiny cove visible from the brig's deck ; we therefore proceeded in the gig, in the first place, alongside the "*Mouette*," where we shipped Francesca's small packet of personal belongings, and then, taking Giacomo in the boat with us, we stepped the mast, hoisted the lug, and ran merrily down before the wind to the entrance of the cove, landing on the beach in perfectly smooth water, after rather more than an hour's sail.

It was by this time growing dusk, and when we reached the

cottage in which General Paoli had established himself, we found that he was out going the rounds, and seeing personally to the posting of the sentinels. His wife, however, who had determined to share with, and if possible mitigate for her husband the hardships of the campaign, was "at home," and from her we all received a most cordial welcome. She was of course distressed to hear of the strait in which we had left her brother-in-law, the count, but was quite decided in her opinion that he had done right to send Francesca away to her, and believed that, once freed of anxiety respecting his daughter, it would be found that he had been able to defend himself so vigorously as to eventually beat off his assailants. She pressed us very earnestly to remain until the general should return, in order that he might have an opportunity personally to thank us both—and me especially—for the important service rendered to his niece ; but Captain Hood was anxious to get back to his ship, so as to go on board the admiral's ship, to take part in a council of war : we were therefore reluctantly compelled to decline.

Before returning to the "Juno," however, we hunted up one or two Corsican officers with whom the skipper had already become acquainted, and learned from them that the Mortella Tower (the battery which had been that day attacked by the two frigates) had, as far as they had been able to ascertain, borne the storm of shot unscathed.

On the way back to the ship I learned from the skipper that the "Juno's" consort in the action was called the "Fortitude," and that she had suffered severely in the engagement, losing six men killed, and fifty-six wounded, having three of her lower-deck guns dismounted, and also being set on fire.

On reaching the "Juno" we found the decks cleared up, every sign of the late combat effaced, and all hands below, but the anchor-watch. Mr. Annesley, however, was on deck, awaiting the skipper's return, and as I followed the latter up the side, the first luff paused before following him into the cabin, and said that, as soon as Captain Hood had left for the admiral's ship, he should be glad to hear an account of my shore-cruise. I accordingly watched the departure of the gig, and then made my way to the poop, where all three of the lieutenants were awaiting me, and to them I related in full detail all that had occurred to me from the moment of leaving the ship to that of rejoining her. I will not repeat the flattering encomiums which my narrative elicited ; suffice it to say that I was greatly gratified by the approval expressed by them all, and particularly by Mr. Annesley's assurance that I had only to go on as I had begun

to become an ornament to the service, and a credit to all connected with me.

The next day or two passed in a state of comparative inactivity with the fleet, Lord Hood having arrived at the conclusion, through his experience of the effects of the engagement between the "Fortitude" and "Juno" and the Mortella Tower, that a further sea-attack upon that battery would be useless, and that its reduction would have to be effected by the land forces. I use the words "comparative inactivity" advisedly, for though the ships themselves were idle, as far as the prosecution of the campaign was concerned, the admiral was indefatigable in drilling and exercising the crews, and in accustoming those of the different ships to act in concert. And in addition to this there was an immense amount of passing to and fro between the fleet and the shore, in the transmission of despatches and the landing of stores and ammunition ; and in these services the little "Mouette" came in very useful, sometimes rushing backward and forward with bulky packets of official documents, and at other times making the passage with a whole fleet of deeply-laden boats in tow. As might be supposed, my experience of her capabilities naturally led to the craft being entrusted to me while thus engaged, so that I was kept in a state of constant activity. I must, however, do Captain Hood the justice to record that, before detailing me for this service, he gave me the option of remaining on board the "Juno," and being excused from duty until my arm had become completely healed. But as I could take as much care of my wounded limb on board the cutter as I could on board the frigate, I gratefully declined, to the gratification of the skipper, I could easily see ; and I thus had frequent opportunities of seeing Francesca, as well as of making the acquaintance of her uncle, General Paoli.

At length, after the interchange of a vast amount of correspondence between Lord Hood and Major-General Dundas, the officer in command of the land forces, it was one evening announced that an attack would be made on the following day upon the Mortella Tower from some batteries thrown up on the adjacent heights, and accordingly, the moment that there was light enough to sight the guns, the cannonade commenced. It lasted for several hours, the fort replying with the utmost vigour to the fire of our batteries, and doing a great deal of execution. By-and-by some genius on our side proposed paying off the French in their own coin by trying the effect of a few red-hot shot upon them. A make-shift furnace for heating the shot was accordingly hastily constructed, and the shot were heated before being discharged at the fort. This soon had

the desired effect. The parapet of the tower was lined with mantlets constructed of bass junk for the purpose of protecting the gunners from splinters, and the red-hot shot striking these mantlets set them on fire, whereupon the French flag was hauled down, and the garrison surrendered.

We of the fleet witnessed this only from a distance, as it was thought possible it might be necessary for some of the ships to approach and engage the battery from the sea, thus distracting the enemy's attention, and placing him between two fires. Everybody therefore remained at his post on board ship in case of his services being required. Luckily, however, for our reputation interference on the part of the fleet was unnecessary, the land forces proving sufficient for the subjugation of the battery, which mounted three guns only—two eighteens and one six-pounder,—and was garrisoned by no more than thirty-three men.

So far, so good. But though we had taken the Mortella Tower, we were still nearly as far off having San Fiorenzo as ever. The town was commanded and completely defended by a formidable redoubt, which mounted twenty-one heavy guns, and was moreover perched upon an eminence which commanded every other accessible height in the neighbourhood, and the possession of this redoubt really meant the possession of San Fiorenzo. So the question of the hour became, how to find a way of getting into this Convention Redoubt, as the place was called.

The first proposal was to storm the place. But on making a careful reconnaissance it became evident that, from its strength and the steepness of the acclivity leading up to it, a storming-party would be annihilated before it could possibly reach the top. Its great elevation above the sea-level rendered it equally hopeless to think of achieving any good result by an attack on the part of the fleet. And so strict a watch was maintained by its garrison, that our leaders soon became convinced of the impossibility of effecting a surprise. Naturally the subjugation of this redoubt became the all-absorbing topic of conversation.

While the interest was at its highest, it happened that Mr. Annesley had occasion to go on shore, and he took a passage with me in the little "Mouette." He had never landed on the island before, and so, as we ran down toward the creek, I pointed out to him the various points of interest in the landscape. He was very anxious to get a sight of the Convention Redoubt, but this was not just then possible, a high rocky acclivity close to the shore shutting out the view. I had often looked at this rock, and had thought what a fine view of the redoubt might be had from its summit, and

how easily the place might be reduced, were it only possible to plant guns there, and I mentioned something of this while we were going ashore.

Our worthy "first" remained silent for a good ten minutes after I had concluded my remarks, intently examining through his telescope the face of the rock meanwhile. At last he said,—

"I should like to give that rock a bit of an overhaul, Chester. Are you a good hand at climbing?"

"Pretty fair, sir, I believe," was my modest reply.

"Well, then, as soon as I have transacted my business, we will both go and see what it looks like," said he.

Accordingly, as soon as he was at liberty, we made our way to the base of the rock. I call it a rock, and so it certainly was; but there was a considerable depth of soil in many places about its sides, which soil was thickly covered with short close herbage, upon which a few goats were browsing here and there, and it sent a thrill through us both to see these active animals leaping from one projection to another, or clinging like flies to the almost perpendicular faces of the thinly-scattered grassy slopes. Looking up at them through our telescopes, it frequently seemed that they had got themselves into such a position, that it would be equally impossible for them to attempt either to go forward or to return without precipitating themselves headlong to the bottom of the precipice.

It was not an encouraging spectacle to two persons who entertained serious thoughts of scaling such a cliff, especially as stones detached by the feet of the scrambling goats above occasionally came plunging down about our ears; but sailors are not easily daunted when it comes to a question of climbing, and accordingly after a careful examination, with the view of selecting the most practicable path, we went resolutely at it.

It was not quite so bad as it looked for about two-thirds of the way up; but when we neared the top, the rocky face became so nearly perpendicular—indeed, it actually overhung in places—that we had serious thoughts of abandoning the enterprise altogether. However, we did not like to be beaten after having achieved so much, so we persevered, and at last, after a most perilous and laborious climb, actually succeeded in reaching the summit.

The view from our exalted situation was superb. We were standing upon the highest eminence for many miles round, and the air was so clear and transparent that distant objects were as distinctly seen as though viewed through a telescope. On our left the blue expanse of the Mediterranean stretched far away to the

northward and westward, dotted here and there with the sails of a few tiny coasting or fishing craft. Below us, and apparently near enough for us to have thrown a stone on board any of them, lay the fleet of men-o'-war and transports, with their sails loose to dry from a heavy shower of the previous night, and the men about their decks reduced to mere moving specks. In front of, and still below us, and so near that we could distinguish the accoutrements of the men forming its garrison, was the redoubt, with its twenty-one guns projecting their muzzles threateningly over the sod parapet, and symmetrical little pyramidal piles of shot heaped up alongside each gun. Beyond it lay San Fiorenzo, with its narrow streets, red-tiled, white-washed houses, terraced gardens, insignificant-looking churches, and the harbour beyond, with the cliffs stretching away beyond it again as far as Cape Corso, and away out at sea the small island of Capriaja. Upon our right a continuous chain of hills reared themselves, thickly wooded to their very summits; while in our rear Calvi, although something like thirty miles distant, was clearly distinguishable.

But the redoubt was with us the chief point of interest. We examined it with the utmost minuteness, and Mr. Annesley, who possessed some skill with the pencil, made an accurate sketch of it, indicating clearly what seemed to us its weakest points. This done, we made a very careful examination on all sides of the face of the rock upon which we stood, finally coming to the conclusion that, though a difficult feat, it was possible to raise a few 18-pounders to the summit.

That same evening Mr. Annesley, accompanied by the skipper, proceeded on board the "Victory," and reported to the admiral the fact of our having scaled the rock, exhibited his sketch of the redoubt, and explained his ideas as to the practicability of establishing a battery upon the summit. The result was that, on the following morning, Lord Hood, Commodore Linzee, Sir Hyde Parker, Captain (afterwards Lord) Nelson, the skipper, and Mr. Annesley took a passage ashore with me in the "Mouette," and all hands of us shinned aloft—the first luff and I to show the way, the rest to reconnoitre.

On reaching the foot of the cliff our superiors (with the exception of Captain Nelson) rather threw cold water upon the proposed scheme of raising guns to the top; Mr. Annesley, however, with respectful firmness maintained his belief in the practicability of his ideas; and after a great deal of discussion they decided to at least attempt the ascent themselves, and see how the project looked from the lofty stand-point of the summit.

By the time that we had accomplished our climb their views had become somewhat modified, Captain Nelson's quick eye having lighted upon several spots, in the progress of his ascent, where it would be practicable to erect sheers or to secure tackles. But it was the sight of the redoubt itself, as seen from the top of the rock, and the complete command of it which would be obtained by a battery planted at the spot whereon they stood, which finally decided the admiral to make the attempt.

The details of the plan were arranged there and then, the most advantageous positions for sheers, &c., fixed upon during the descent, the resources of the fleet discussed on the passage off, and, immediately on our arrival alongside the "Victory," the preparations were commenced. Anchors, chains, ropes, blocks, &c., were loaded into the ships' boats, spare spars were launched overboard and formed into a raft, and that same evening the "Mouette" left the fleet, with fourteen boats and the raft in tow; and the wind happening to be dead fair, and just a nice little breeze for the purpose, enabling us all to crowd every stitch of canvas we could set, we ran gaily down before it, and by dusk had everything ashore in readiness for the commencement of our task the first thing on the following morning.

It is not necessary to describe in detail the operations which eventually resulted in the planting of a battery of 18-pounder guns, together with the necessary ammunition, upon the summit of that precipitous rock, at a height of no less than 700 feet above the sea-level; suffice it to briefly say that by the almost unparalleled skill and perseverance of the officers in charge, and the equally extraordinary exertions of the blue-jackets, the feat was actually accomplished, and by sunset on the 15th of February, 1794, everything was ready for opening fire.

I had hoped that, as the idea might fairly be said to have originated with me, I should be entrusted with the charge of one of the working parties engaged in the task of establishing the battery; but, much to my disappointment, I was left in charge of the cutter, which, during the progress of the operations, was kept going between the fleet and the shore literally day and night, in consequence of which Mr. Robert Summers was turned over to me as my first lieutenant. We grumbled almost incessantly at our hard lot in not being allowed to render our valuable assistance more directly to the work in hand, but the reward for our enforced self-denial was nearer at hand than either of us expected.

The morning of the 16th broke fair and clear, with scarcely a breath of air to ruffle the surface of the water, and with the first

streak of dawn all hands were aroused by the roar of the cannonade from the Cliff Battery, as we had named it. All day long without a moment's intermission was the fire kept up, and on into the evening as long as there was light enough to see. Then the fire slackened down somewhat, the efforts of our gunners being merely directed through the night to the prevention of all attempts on the part of the enemy to execute repairs. On the following morning our guns again opened upon the devoted redoubt, and shortly after midday a message was brought down to me for conveyance to the admiral, the substance of which was that there was every indication of a practicable breach being effected before sunset.

There was a fresh breeze dead against us, but we crowded sail on the cutter to such an extent, in our eagerness to get off to the fleet with the welcome news, that it is the greatest wonder in the world we did not carry the sticks out of her. Arrived under the lee of the "Victory," Bob and I jumped into our dingy, and, rowing alongside the flag-ship, sprang up her lofty sides, and, finding the admiral on the quarter-deck, went up to him and delivered our message.

"I was wondering," said Sir Hyde Parker, who was also on the quarter-deck, "what good news you young monkeys had to tell, that you were carrying-on upon the boat in that unmerciful manner. If you are not more careful, young gentlemen, that craft will turn the turtle with you some day, and our friend Hood will lose two of his most promising officers, eh?"

The admiral looked at us for a moment with just the ghost of a smile flickering over his inscrutable features, and then ordered the signal to be made for the captains of the various men-o'-war to rendezvous on board the flag-ship.

"I have arranged with Dundas," he said, "to send a brigade on shore to help make up the storming-party, and I think it will be best to let each captain call for a certain number of volunteers."

Bob and I stepped forward with one accord, just as Sir Hyde whipped round upon his heel and said sharply,—

"If you have no objection, sir, I should like to lead our blue-jackets in this affair. You will have to send some one with them; they will be worse than useless in the hands of the soldier-officers, since they will not understand each other, and I might as well go as another."

"Not to be thought of for a moment, sir," returned the admiral. "No, no, no; give one or other of the captains a chance to distinguish himself; you have already made your mark. Well, what can I do for you, young gentlemen?" turning to us.

"We shall volunteer, sir," said I, as bold as brass; "and we should feel *very* much obliged if you will put in a word for us with the sk— with Captain Hood, sir, if you please."

"Have either of you ever been present at the storming of a fortress?" asked the admiral.

"No, sir," cut in Bob, taking the words out of my mouth, "but we have boarded an enemy's ship before now, sir, which is pretty much the same thing."

"About as much like it as the musketry-fire of a squad of marines is to the broadside of this ship," remarked the admiral. "No, my lads, take my advice and remain on board your ship. I have no doubt your courage is more than sufficient for such work, but you lack *strength*. *Men* are needed for a storming-party; you could be of no possible use, and by going would only risk your lives needlessly. I am sorry to be obliged to refuse you, but I should not be justified in acceding to your request. You may retire, young gentlemen, but I shall not forget your gallant behaviour."

We accordingly retreated down the side, very much crest-fallen and disappointed indeed, and, jumping into the dingy, returned to the "Mouette," just as the captains' gigs from the various ships were coming up alongside.

Seating ourselves upon the companion-slide, and dangling our legs disconsolately down the companion, we abandoned ourselves to the most gloomy reflections, watching meanwhile the boats as they dashed up alongside the flag-ship, and cynically criticizing the stroke and action of the several crews; and I am afraid the skippers themselves did not altogether escape our disparaging remarks.

We had been sitting thus for about a quarter of an hour, giving unrestrained vent to our feelings of dissatisfaction, when Bob's countenance suddenly brightened, and, turning to me, he exclaimed in an animated tone of voice,—

"I say, Chester, what fools we are! Let's go aboard the old "Juno" and wait until the skipper returns, and when he calls for volunteers we'll be the first to step to the front. Old Hood" (it was in this unpardonably disrespectful manner he alluded to the admiral) "has forgotten all about us by this time, and so he will never think of mentioning to the skipper our request, and I don't see why we haven't a good chance yet. Do you?"

No sooner said than done. We knew that the chiefs would at that moment be seated in the admiral's cabin, so, filling upon the cutter, we bore away and ran down under the lee of the "Juno,"

whose deck we gained just as the captains' gigs were shoving off from the "Victory's" accommodation-ladder.

Ten minutes afterwards Captain Hood came up the side, and immediately gave orders for all hands to come aft. He then, accompanied by Mr. Annesley, went up on the poop, and stood there, watching the eager and expectant faces of the men as they clustered thickly in the waist on both sides of the deck. The officers were all grouped together upon the quarter-deck.

Waiting until all hands were present, the skipper stepped forward to the head of the poop-ladder, and, waving his hand for silence, said,—

"My lads, I have just weturned from a conference with the admiwal, at which every captain in the fleet was pwesent. And I am—ah—charged by Lord Hood to expwess to you all—officers and men alike—his thanks for your wecent exertions in waising the guns to the top of yonder wock. The battewy thus—er—ah—placed in position will, it is expected, effect a—a pwacticable bweach in the wall of the Convention Wedoubt by sunset this evening, and it is intended to storm the place as soon as—ah—darkness sets in. The storming-party is to be made up of an equal number of soldiers and blue-jackets—" here the speaker was interrupted by an enthusiastic cheer from his audience, the repetition of which was checked by the skipper's uplifted hand—"the storming-party," he continued, "is to be composed equally, I say, of soldiers and blue-jackets, and the admiwal has authowized each captain to call for fifty volunteers—keep steady, men ; be silent and—ah—wait until I have quite finished, if you please. I am authowized to call for fifty volunteers ; but I wish you all distinctly to understand that no man who has in any way misconducted himself will be accepted. Now let those who volunteer for the storming-party come abaft the mainmast."

Bob and I, knowing what was coming, had gradually edged to the front—we were of course, with the rest of the officers, already abaft the mainmast—and, directly the skipper ceased, we stepped smartly out and posted ourselves at the foot of the poop-ladder, to show that we were volunteering ; and then faced round to witness the effect of Captain Hood's speech upon the crew.

The scene was irresistibly comic. In the first place we found that the group of officers had simply shifted position in a compact body, so that we all stood pretty much as we were before. The front ranks of the men had also advanced until they were well abaft the mainmast, when they halted—that is, they *would* have halted had it not been for the pressure behind, which was pretty

steady in the front portion of the mass, but in the rear something very like a panic ensued, and almost before one could count ten those unfortunates who had not already gained the coveted position began to clamber over the booms, along the hammock-rail, and actually out through the ports, along the main-channels, and in again through the ports farther aft, in their eagerness to volunteer. The struggling and elbowing increased until it became almost desperate, when one of the boatswain's mates—a brawny, muscular, old sea-dog, with a mahogany visage, a gigantic pig-tail, and his chest and arms elaborately tattooed—stepped out, and, facing round, exclaimed in stentorian tones,—

“Avast heaving there, ye unmannerly swabs; do you take his Majesty's quarter-deck—” lifting his hat—“for a playhouse-booth on Southsea common? Belay all, and stand fast, every mother's son of ye, and let me speak to the skipper for ye.”

Then, facing the poop once more, he stepped forward out of the crowd, and doffing his hat, while he made an elaborate sea-scrape with his right foot and gave a tug at his forelock, he addressed the skipper somewhat as follows,—

“I hope your honour'll kindly overlook this little bit of a scrimmage that's just took place, and forgive our unperliteness, seeing as how a many of us has never had a chance of larnin' how to behave ourselves in delicate sitivations. Your honour doesn't need to be told—at least, we hopes not—that we didn't mean nothing in any way unbecoming or disrespectful to you or the rest of the hofficers—no, not by no manner of means whatsoever. All we want to say is just this here: that all hands on us, down to the powder-monkeys, begs most respectably to wolunteer for this here boardin'-party; and we hopes as how you'll take the whole kit of us, 'ceptin' of course the black-sheep as your honour spoke of just now, and let them and the “jollies” look arter the old barkie, who won't mind takin' care of herself for an hour or two—God bless her!—while us, her precious hinfants, is havin' a little bit of a lark with the Crapoos ashore there.”

A loud murmur of approval greeted this effort on the part of the boatswain's mate, and then everybody awaited in silence the reply.

A deep flush of gratification lighted up Captain Hood's features as he said,—

“I thank you from my heart, men, for your—um—generous wesponse to my call, and I am sincerely sowwy that I cannot take you—er—eh—at your words. But the admiwal's instwuctions are impewative, and I have no power to dwaw more than the specified

number. As therefore you have *all* volunteered, the "Juno's" contingent shall be chosen by lot, whereby all partiality or unfairness will be avoided, and I hope that the awwangement will pwove satisfactowy."

The crew were accordingly arranged in a double rank, fore and aft the deck, and lots drawn—each man choosing a folded slip of paper from a bundle, fifty of which were marked, the remainder being blank.

Then came the question of selecting officers, a proper quota of which were to go with the men. It came out at this stage of the proceedings that our skipper had been chosen to command the naval brigade; Mr. Annesley therefore, much to his chagrin, found that he had no option but to remain on board. The second and third lieutenants tossed up to decide which of them should go, and the "second" was lucky enough to win. One other officer was required, and the lot fell on Percival, the master's-mate. The doctor was to go, as a matter of course, but he was to be a non-combatant. Little Summers and I—poor Pilgarlic—were so entirely consumed with disgust, that we could find no words sufficiently powerful to express our feelings, and we simply stood glaring at each other in moody silence.

Suddenly a brilliant idea flashed through my brain. Winking encouragingly at the disconsolate Bob, I stepped boldly up to the skipper, and, touching my cap, said,—

"I hope, sir, as the officers will doubtless go ashore in the cutter, that you will allow Summers and me to land and join the storming-party. We will try to make ourselves useful, sir, in the carrying of messages and so on, and—and we have been looking forward so much to the affair that—that we *hope* you will not disappoint us, sir."

"Oh!" said the skipper; "you wish—you and Summers—to join the storming-party, eh? Well, I weally don't know what to say about that; it would scarcely be fair to the other young gentlemen, you know. Still—um—ah—let me see. The admiwal and some of the officers, not forming part of the stormers, are going on shore, and they will doubtless use the cutter; and as they will stay until all is over, I think you may venture to join us, and if you get into twouble over the affair, I must do the best I can to make excuses for you."

"Hurrah, Bob!" I exclaimed, as I rejoined my despondent friend. "Faint heart never won fair lady; the skipper has given us permission to slip ashore and join the stormers, so off you go at once and get ready. And don't be long, old chap, for the

admiral and a lot more are going ashore in the little "Mouette," and we must be on hand directly our signal is made."

"Never fear," joyously responded Bob. "I'll be ready in a brace of shakes; I've only to get my 'weepons' as our Scotch doctor calls them, and I'll be on deck again as soon as you are."

Having already so successfully enacted the part of a petitioner, I determined to try my luck once more, and accordingly hunted up the Honourable Mortimer, who had retired to his cabin. One of the hobbies of our somewhat eccentric "third" was the collection of choice weapons, several valuable specimens of which adorned his state-room. If he ever saw anything specially curious or choice in the shape of sword or pistol, he never rested until he had made it his own; but when once the coveted article had come into his possession he seemed to lose all further interest in it, and accordingly, being also a good-natured individual enough, he was always ready to lend from his stock, provided an undertaking were entered into to take due care of the borrowed article, and to faithfully return it.

To this accommodating friend I briefly stated my case, which was simply, that as there was just a bare possibility—I did not like to put it any stronger, remembering that he was one of the disappointed ones—of my being present at the storming of the redoubt, I was anxious to be provided with some more efficient weapon than my dirk, and that I would feel very much obliged to him if he would lend me one of his swords. This he at once did, bidding me take my choice, and I thereupon selected a beautiful Turkish scimitar, the curved blade of which, inlaid with a delicate scroll pattern in gold, was as keen as a razor. Tucking this under my arm, and thanking him duly for his kindness, I next hurried away to the armourer, and wheedled him out of a pair of ship's pistols, together with the necessary ammunition; after which I returned to the deck and awaited my ally, calm in the consciousness that I was now prepared for any and every emergency. I was almost immediately afterwards joined by Bob, whose face beamed with delight as he directed my attention to a ship's cutlass which he had girded to his thigh, and a pair of long-barrelled duelling-pistols which our fire-eating "second" had entrusted to his care. We at once trundled down over the side into our cockle-shell of a boat, and, getting on board the "Mouette" with all speed, roused up the anchor and dodged about well in view of the admiral, keeping a sharp look-out for the "whiff" in the mizzen-rigging, which was our especial signal for service.



CHAPTER XVIII.

THE STORMING OF THE REDOUBT, AND THE ATTACK ON BASTIA

AS the afternoon wore on the wind grew light, and by eight bells it had so far died away that it was practically valueless to the boats which were to convey the naval brigade to the shore. The admiral, however, would not allow the men to row, being anxious that they should reach the scene of action fresh and vigorous ; at the last moment, therefore, one of the lieutenants belonging to the "Victory" was sent on board the "Requin"—or the "Shark," as she was now almost universally called—with orders to get under weigh and tow the flotilla down to the cove.

At the same time our signal was made, in obedience to which we went through the fleet and took on board Lord Hood, Sir Hyde Parker, Vice-Admiral Hotham, Captain Purvis of the "Princess Royal," Commodore Linzee, Captain Elphinstone of the "Robust," Captain Nelson of the "Agamemnon," and some half a dozen other officers who were going on shore to witness the attack.

By the time that we had embarked all our passengers, the "Shark" was under weigh and dodging about, waiting for the boats, which were alongside their respective ships, taking in their proper complement of men.

When all was ready, the boats shoved off and pulled for the brig, which was by this time hove-to in readiness for taking them in tow. Admiral Hood himself marshalled the boats in the order which he wished them to take ; and two stout hawsers being passed out of the brig's stern-ports, the boats were lashed to them in two divisions, larboard and starboard ; and when everything was arranged to the satisfaction of our chief, he gave the order for the brig to fill, and away we went.

It took us an hour and a half to reach the cove, the wind being so light ; and in order to remain in company, the little "Mouette's" canvas had to be reduced to a close-reefed mainsail and small jib, under which we were still able to sail round the flotilla occasionally, in order that Lord Hood might see that all was right.

It was just growing dusk when the boats, having cast off from the towing hawsers, pulled into the cove and grounded on its steep shingly beach. We anchored the "Mouette" about a cable's length from the beach, landed our passengers, and watched them fairly out of sight on the San Fiorenzo road, when Bob and I leaped into our dingy and were pulled ashore. The naval brigade was by this time in motion ; and, hurrying forward, we soon found ourselves alongside the "Juno's" contingent, under the command of the second lieutenant, whose Irish blood was already up, and who greeted our appearance with a rollicking joke, which would in almost any other man have been unbecoming the dignity of his rank. But "Paddy" Flinn—or Micky Flinn, as he was indifferently called by his friends—had a subtle knack of behaving in an undignified manner, without jeopardizing the respect due to him ; for, let his vagaries take what form they would, he never by any chance descended to the committal of a mean, cowardly, or ungentlemanly act.

The camp of the land forces was pitched at a distance of about two miles from the beach ; and the march was accomplished in about three-quarters of an hour, our tars beguiling the way with jokes and yarns of the most outrageous and improbable character. The strictest discipline was always maintained on board ship ; but on land-expeditions, which would admit of it, a little more freedom was tacitly permitted.

When we reached the point of rendezvous, we found the troops who were to share with us the honours of the night already on the ground, and waiting. The guns of the Cliff Battery were still thundering away far above us ; and the redoubt was replying with apparently undiminished vigour.

The place of rendezvous was a sort of ravine, situated about midway between the two opposing batteries ; the ground being masked from the redoubt by one of the precipitous sides of the ravine. At the farther end, the precipice gradually merged into a steep slope, from the summit of which rose the hill upon which the redoubt stood ; and up these two steep slopes the storming-party had to go.

By the time that all was ready, night had completely set in. Contrary to our hopes, it was exquisitely fine, not a single shred of cloud obscuring the deep blue vault of heaven. The wind had died away to the faintest zephyr, and the dew was falling so copiously that it promised soon to wet us to the skin. At a signal, made by the waving of a lantern, the guns of the Cliff Battery above us suddenly became mute, as though the artillerymen had

given up for the night ; and a calm and tranquil silence ensued, broken only by the gentle rustle of the fitful breeze through the foliage of some firs which were dotted here and there along the precipitous sides of the ravine, the chirping of insects, the occasional twitter of a sleeping bird, or a low murmur here and there in the serried ranks of armed men which stood awaiting the order to rush forth to death or victory. The stars flooded the scene with their subdued and mellow radiance, and, but for the occasional gleam of a naked weapon, everything was suggestive of restfulness and peace.

It had been hoped that we should be able to take the garrison of the redoubt at least partially by surprise ; but the fineness and silence of the night rendered this impossible ; as soon, therefore, as everything was ready, the party moved forward toward the farther end of the ravine, the soldiers leading the way, in accordance with the proviso of Major-General Dundas, who refused to co-operate with the naval brigade upon any other terms. It took us but a few minutes to reach the end of the ravine ; and directly we were clear and had reached a point where the first slope became practicable, we were led up it at an easy pace, and halted just beneath its brow—and consequently under cover—in order that all hands might recover their wind in readiness for the rush up the second slope to the redoubt.

I was not, at that period of my life, particularly susceptible to serious thought or grave reflections ; but as I stood on that steep hill-side in the hush and solemn beauty of the star-lit night, and looked upon that band of silent men, every one of them with the pulses of life beating quick and strong within him, his frame aglow with health, and every nerve quivering with intense excitement, the awful thought flashed through my brain that, with many of them, a few brief seconds only stood between them and eternity. I wondered to how many of them had the same idea presented itself ; and then came the question, “Does God ever in His infinite mercy, in such supreme moments as this, inspire similar reflections in the minds of the doomed ones, in order that they may not be hurried into His presence wholly unprepared ?” It might be so, I thought ; and if that were the case, was it not probable that, coming to me at such a time, they foreshadowed my own doom, and warned me to prepare for it while still I had an opportunity ? Five minutes hence, perhaps, and Time would be, for me, no more. The signal to advance—the breathless rush—the flash and roar of artillery, a sickening crash, a hideous whirl, in which all nature becomes blotted out, and then—THE GREAT WHITE THRONE.

Was that what lay before me? The oppressive excitement under which I had been labouring passed away; tears of emotion welled up into my eyes, and my heart went up to God in a brief, silent, fervent prayer for mercy and forgiveness; that if I were about to die I might be pardoned for Christ's sake and received into everlasting life. For a minute or two the fear of death—or rather, of the eternity beyond death—had been upon me; but with the conclusion of my hurried prayer the mantle of fear fell from my shoulders, and a blessed peace—"the peace of God, which passeth all understanding," as I reverently believed—took its place. I was supported by a consciousness, or perhaps it was only a belief, that whatever happened I was safe; and from that moment my only anxiety was to faithfully do my duty.

At length, sufficient time having been allowed for the men to completely recover their breath and brace themselves for the final rush up the hill to the redoubt, the word was given, and we dashed over the brow of the slope and charged up the steep ascent; and at the same instant the artillerymen in the Cliff Battery—who had been keenly watching our movements—reopened with a terrific fire upon the devoted redoubt.

Our men gave a single ringing, soul-stirring cheer, as they sprang into view, and then were silent, the exertion of pressing up that steep acclivity leaving them no breath to waste in profitless noise. The distance to be traversed was not more than 200 yards—no great matter upon level ground—but the hill rose so abruptly that, after the first fifty yards, our pace was reduced to something between a walk and a climb. The French, too, had evidently expected and been on the watch for us; for we had hardly advanced twenty paces before the parapet of the redoubt blazed out above us in a long line of fire; a storm of round shot and grape swept down upon us; great ghastly gaps were mown out of our ranks, a hideous chorus of shrieks and groans rose above the thundering roar of the artillery, and long lines of dead and dying men marked the path of the pitiless shot. The calmness and stillness of night gave place to a horrible discord of deafening sounds; the earth beneath our feet shook and vibrated with the ceaseless discharge of heavy guns; the baleful glare of portfires and fireballs flung down the hill by the enemy to enable them more clearly to ascertain our position, and the incessant flash of the cannon, cast a fierce, unearthly light upon the scene. Again, again, and again came the hissing storm of iron, each time with more deadly effect; the ground before and around us was ploughed and gashed by the rushing shot; our men were swept away before

it like withered leaves before a hurricane ; the death-cries of cherished comrades continually pierced the ear ; the storming-party was melting away like snow beneath the scorching breath of that fiery tempest ; and still the remnant struggled on.

At length that fearful breathless climb was nearly over. We were so near the redoubt that the muzzles of the guns could no longer be depressed sufficiently for the shot to take effect ; the artillerymen, therefore, left their cannon and joined the grenadiers in throwing down hand-grenades upon us, or in pouring in a ceaseless musketry fire. The guns in the Cliff Battery also became silent, in dread of striking friends as well as foes. A few yards more, and we were close enough to distinguish the stern, bronzed features of the defenders clustering thick in the breach to bar our entrance, the musketry flashes gleaming on their glistening eyeballs, and flickering on their levelled bayonet-points. My recent runs on shore, and the exercise of climbing up and down the Cliff rock seemed to have given me an advantage over the rest ; for there was by this time no one in front of me. Two individuals there were, however, close at hand, in one of whom I recognized the skipper, the other being Major-General Dundas. They were evidently racing for the breach, and the skipper was getting the worst of it, being thoroughly blown. We were all three pretty evenly in line, but the soldier had chosen his road with the greater judgment. At last the skipper, too exhausted to keep upright any longer, put his sword between his teeth and went down on his hands and knees. I saw at once the nature of the rivalry, it was a struggle which should reach the breach first, the army or the navy ; and I knew Captain Hood would rather lose a hundred pounds than be beaten.

Like them, I was dreadfully exhausted, the fatigue I experienced being so great that it amounted to positive pain ; the muscles of my legs in particular ached and quivered violently with the exertions I had been making. Still, I was not nearly so bad as the other two, being decidedly strong and vigorous for my age, and I determined that the skipper should be gratified if it lay in my power ; so I scrambled to his side and held out my hand to him shouting,—

“Let me give you a tow, sir ; and we’ll be in before the red-coat yet.”

He grasped my hand without a word, rose to his feet, and together we strained and pressed upward. A couple of yards still lay between us and the hedge of bayonets which guarded the breach. The bullets flew about us thick as hail ; one passing

through my hat, another shredding away half the bullion from the skipper's starboard epaulette, two more actually passing through my jacket and rasing the skin ; yet by a miracle we escaped unwounded.

One more desperate effort, and we staggered up the loose *débris* and into the breach, a clear yard ahead of our rival ; and then, shoulder to shoulder, we stood and tried to recover our breath as best we could, defending ourselves meanwhile from the innumerable cuts and thrusts which were aimed at us. The next to arrive was, of course, Major-General Dundas ; then came Mr. Flinn, closely followed by the captain of the "Juno's" main-top ; then five or six soldiers ; and, thus strengthened, we pressed forward, foot by foot, the Frenchmen obstinately contesting every inch of the way, until we had fairly penetrated to the interior of the redoubt, when—a path being thus cleared for those who came behind—the relics of the storming-party surged in and rushed upon the enemy with such resistless impetuosity that some of the garrison threw down their arms and surrendered ; while the rest broke and fled in direst confusion.

A feeble cheer announced our success, which was immediately answered by a ringing "three times three—and one cheer more, for the storming-party," from the occupants of the Cliff Battery away aloft in the cool night air.

Poor little Bobby Summers came panting in with the ruck, after all was over ; and the first use he made of his breath, after he had recovered it sufficiently to speak, was to abuse me in unmeasured terms for what he was pleased to term my "meanness," in leaving him to struggle up the hill unaided.

All hands remained on shore that night, to make everything secure, and to guard against the possibility of an attempt to retake the redoubt ; the storming-party being quickly reinforced by a strong detachment from the camp, which had been held in readiness to march in as soon as the redoubt should be carried.

Then came the sickening task of collecting the dead and wounded, arranging the former for burial, and attending to the wants of the latter and making them as comfortable as possible under the circumstances. But I will not go into the details of this accompaniment to the "pomp and circumstance of war," lest I should unnecessarily harrow the feelings of my readers ; suffice it to say that our task was not accomplished until long after sunrise ; while that of the naval and military surgeons of course lasted for weeks.

The fall of the Convention Redoubt left the town of San Fiorenzo

at our mercy, and accordingly, when next day our troops marched into the town, it was found that the French had evacuated it, and had retired to Bastia.

This, the most important town in the island, and, at the period of my story, also the most strongly fortified—whatever it may be at the present day—is about six miles from San Fiorenzo; and is situated on the eastern or opposite side of the long narrow peninsula which forms the northern extremity of Corsica. It was against it that, in Lord Hood's opinion, our next operations ought to be directed.

His views, however, and those of Major-General Dundas were widely divergent as to the practicability of the proposed scheme; the latter being of opinion that we had neither strength nor means sufficient to effect the reduction of so strongly fortified a place as Bastia; while Lord Hood, on the other hand, was sanguine of success. This difference of opinion between the heads of the forces led to a protracted and vexatious delay, during which we of the fleet busied ourselves successfully in raising the French thirty-eight-gun frigate, "*Minerve*," which her crew had sunk in San Fiorenzo harbour. This ship was afterwards added to our navy under the name of the "*San Fiorenzo*."

I must not omit to mention that, a few days after the taking of the Convention Redoubt, Captain Hood publicly thanked me, on the "*Juno's*" quarter-deck, for the assistance I had rendered him on that memorable night; and the story also reaching the admiral's ears, I had the gratification of being warmly commended by that great chief, as well as of finding that my name had been prominently mentioned in his despatches home. Several other officers also thanked me for supporting the reputation of the navy, Captain Nelson being especially eulogistic—for him—on the subject. So that, altogether, I received a far greater share of credit than it seemed to me so simple a matter merited.

At length, meeting after meeting having taken place between Lord Hood and Major-General Dundas, without those officers being able to agree upon the question of investing Bastia, something very like a rupture took place; the admiral declaring that so confident was he of success, that, since General Dundas would not co-operate with him, he would undertake alone the task of reducing the place with the seamen and marines belonging to the fleet.

This resolution once arrived at, Lord Hood forthwith set about the work of carrying it out with his accustomed energy. An old twenty-eight-gun frigate, called the "*Proselyte*," was specially fitted up as a floating battery, and, with the rest of the fleet, taken round

to Bastia roads. The marines were then landed, and, aided by a strong contingent of blue-jackets, who were placed under the command of Captain Horatio Nelson, at once set to work to throw up a chain of sod batteries, completely investing the town on the land side.

So much precious time had been wasted in discussing the *pros* and *cons* of this matter, that, notwithstanding our utmost exertions, it was not until the second week of April, 1794, that our batteries were finished, the guns mounted, and everything ready for the projected attack. The evening of the 10th, however, saw our preparations completed; and on the morning of the 11th the "Proselyte" was moved inshore and moored in a convenient position for battering the seaward defences of the town.

The attack immediately afterwards commenced; the "Proselyte" and the shore batteries opening fire simultaneously. The French replied with the utmost spirit, their guns being admirably served, especially those which played upon the "Proselyte;" and it soon became evident that that unfortunate craft was getting decidedly the worst of it. She was the only ship engaged, the admiral having early come to the conclusion that it would be madness to expose his fleet, unprotected, to the fire of the heavy metal mounted in the French defences; we therefore—the few of us, that is, who were not detailed for duty on shore—had nothing to do for the time being but watch the fun.

The action had been in progress but a short time, when we observed that the "Proselyte" was swinging round; and on looking at her more attentively, with the aid of our telescopes, we discovered that some of her moorings had been shot away. Her remaining cables soon brought her up again; but not until she had drifted into a frightfully exposed position. The fire of the French batteries was immediately concentrated upon the devoted craft with increased energy; and presently little jets of greyish smoke, issuing here and there from her sides, showed that the enemy was effectively firing red-hot shot.

About ten minutes afterwards a little string of balls was seen soaring aloft to her mast-head. The balls burst apart, and four signal flags fluttered in the breeze.

I raised my telescope to my eye and read out the numbers to Mr. Annesley, who was busy turning over the leaves of the signal-book.

He ran his finger hastily along the column of figures, and read out to the skipper, who was looking over his shoulder,—

"Ship on fire—send assistance"

"Now, Mr. Chester, keep your eye on the admiral, and see what he says," remarked the skipper.

As he spoke I saw a signal going aloft on board the "Victory," and managed to get it into the field of my telescope just as the flags burst abroad at the mast-head.

I read out the numbers again.

"All right; I know what that means, without turning up the numbers," said the skipper quickly. "It means, 'Send away boats to ship in distress.' So have the goodness to pipe away the pinnace and first and second cutters, if you please, Mr. Annesley."

In another moment the boatswain's shrill pipe was sounding throughout the ship; the boats, which were hanging at the boom, were brought alongside, manned, placed in charge of a midshipman to each boat, and despatched with all speed to the assistance of the unlucky "Proselyte," from which, by this time, dense clouds of dark smoke were issuing.

Meanwhile the boats from the rest of the fleet were also pushing off with the same object as ourselves; and an exciting race ensued. We were among the last to arrive alongside, having had a longer distance to pull than any of the other boats; and when we reached the doomed craft, the flames were bursting out through her ports, roaring fiercely up through her hatchways, and soaring aloft by means of her rigging like fiery serpents. Some of her guns were already nearly red-hot. Part of her main deck had fallen in; and her main and mizzen-masts were so far burnt through at the foot that they threatened momentarily to fall.

Although the flames were blazing so fiercely, and had obtained such a complete hold upon the ship that the magazine was expected to explode at any moment, and although the enemy, taking full advantage of the disaster, was concentrating a terrific fire upon that part of the ship where her crew were mustered, awaiting their turn to go down over the side into the boats which were waiting to receive them, there was not a trace of hurry or confusion. Commander Serocold, who had been given the command of the unfortunate craft, stood on the rail and personally directed the process of trans-shipping; sending down first the injured, then the younger and rawer portion of the crew, then the veterans—the sturdy old bronzed and weather-beaten salts, whose nerves were thoroughly proof against the worst terrors of battle, fire, or flood,—next the officers, and finally, when he was quite satisfied that no living being but himself remained on board, he raised his uniform cap as if in salute, slipped down the side, and gave the order to "give way."

"Stretch out to your work, lads," he exclaimed, as the oars dashed into the water ; "throw your whole hearts into it ; the fire must be close to the magazine, and—"

A terrific concussion, a dull heavy roar, and the poor old "Proselyte" was rent to pieces, as a broad sheet of flame flashed up from her hull skyward. A wall of water some five feet high leapt up just under our stern, and immediately afterwards curled over upon us, completely swamping the boat. Fragments of planks and beams, heavy bolts, spars, and other wreckage whizzed through the air all around us ; and one of the guns, still mounted on its carriage, and with its shattered tackles streaming in the air, was hurled outwards and fell into the water with a tremendous splash, within six feet of where we were all left struggling in the water. Then a great cloud of black smoke shot up into the air ; and the blackened remains of the hull, collapsing amidships, sank out of sight, creating a great seething whirl, which dragged us all helplessly into its vortex, and sucked us ruthlessly down, down deep into the darkening bosom of the ocean.

Stunned, and almost insensible from the violence of the shock, I still had presence of mind left to close my nostrils with the fingers of one hand, and to hold my breath, as I was helplessly whirled hither and thither ; and at last, just as my powers of endurance had reached the point of exhaustion, I rose again to the surface, and beheld once more the welcome sight of the bright sunlight flashing upon the dancing billows.

The water all round me was thickly strewn with wreckage ; and a few pieces were still falling here and there, showing the height to which the fragments had been projected. A dozen or so of human heads appeared on the surface of the water at no great distance from me ; and others were momentarily popping up above the waves ; the owners, one and all, immediately striking out, more or less scientifically, for the nearest floating object.

Looking round me, I soon had the satisfaction of discovering the gallant commander of the ill-fated "Proselyte," clinging to the keel of our boat, which was floating bottom-up at no great distance from me. Seeing that all hands appeared pretty well able to take care of themselves, I at once struck out and joined him.

"Ah ! Mr. Chester," he exclaimed, as I ranged alongside, "glad to see that you have weathered it so well. It was a very narrow squeak ; and we have come out of it a good deal better than I dared expect. I have been trying to count heads, and I make out thirty-eight, all told ; how many men had you with you ?"

"Twelve," I answered.

"Twelve?" he repeated, "then that brings us out all right, for I counted twenty-four of my people as they passed down into the boat, and I make twenty-five, which, with you and your dozen, brings up the complement. Here come the boats to pick us up. I have no doubt the explosion has frightened all the sharks within a dozen miles of us, and started them off to seaward under a heavy press of sail; otherwise I should not feel quite so easy in my mind about those poor fellows. Some of them are clinging to very small pieces of wreckage, and would have no chance if attacked."

I remarked that I thought there was not very much danger; an opinion which soon received singular confirmation; for while we were still speaking, immense numbers of fish of all sizes and descriptions, some killed, and others merely stunned by the violence of the explosion, floated up to the surface; and shortly afterwards, when the boats had picked us all up, and we were pulling out toward the fleet, we fell in with an enormous shark, floating helplessly on his back, in an apparently paralyzed condition. A running bowline was promptly slipped over his tail and drawn taut; and he was triumphantly and unresistingly towed alongside the "Victory," and hoisted inboard.





CHAPTER XIX.

A FOOLHARDY ADVENTURE.



SHORT time after this, a melancholy event occurred, which cast a gloom over the entire fleet.

The siege was not progressing to the admiral's satisfaction ; the garrison showed no sign of yielding ; and our chief became anxious to learn something with regard to the condition of things within the walls of Bastia.

The moment that this desire became known, a host of volunteers stepped forward, with offers to do their best to make their way inside and gain the required information. Admiral Hood, however, felt very reluctant to allow any of these volunteers to expose themselves to so great a risk ; particularly as it turned out, when questioned, that not one of them had been able to devise a really practicable and promising scheme.

The least unpromising idea of them all, was that suggested by Lieutenant Carré Tupper, of the flag-ship ; which was, that he should endeavour to effect a landing inside the chain of defences, and, penetrating into the town, gain all the information he could ; and trust to his good fortune for the means of getting off to the ship again. This plan seemed all the more feasible, from the fact that he spoke the French language with the ease and fluency of a Parisian.

After much consideration, therefore, the admiral accepted this gallant young officer's offer, and gave his consent to the experiment.

A disguise was accordingly prepared under Lieutenant Tupper's own supervision ; and on the first favourable night the experiment was tried.

It was perfectly calm, with an overcast sky and no moon, when he stood, dressed in his disguise, in the gangway of the "Victory," receiving from the admiral his last instructions ; and many a hearty hand-shake, and many a fervent "Success attend you, my dear

fellow," did he receive before passing down the lofty side of the 100-gun ship, into the pinnace which, with muffled oars and a crew armed to the teeth, awaited him at the foot of the side-ladder.

At last the final parting was spoken, the final shake of the hand given, and with a gay laugh, in reponse to the half-serious, half-jocose warnings to take care of himself which followed him, he sprang lightly down the side, took his seat in the stern-sheets, and gave the order to shove off.

He had most carefully reconnoitred the place beforehand, both from the topgallant-yard of the "Victory," and from the deck of the little "Mouette;" so that he knew exactly for what point to steer; and there was no hesitation whatever upon that score.

All went well with the little expedition until the boat arrived within half a mile of Bastia, when a little breeze sprang up; the canopy of cloud which had overspread the heavens cleared away as if by magic, and the stars shone out brilliantly, flooding earth and sea with a light which, though subdued, was sufficient to reveal to the sharp-eyed French sentinels the small dark object which was silently stealing toward the shore.

The alarm was immediately given; but instead of opening upon the boat with their heavy guns, at the risk of missing their object, and driving off their prey, the French allowed the boat still to approach, and, marking carefully the spot for which she was making, silently placed a strong body of sharpshooters in ambush to await her coming.

Had the Frenchmen in ambush but observed the most ordinary caution, there is no doubt they would easily have captured the boat and the whole of her crew, but instead of this they gave way to the excitement which is one of their failings, and indulged in such loud and continuous chatter that the coxswain of the pinnace heard them when within about twenty yards of the landing-place, and the boat was at once pulled round with her head off shore, and the crew ordered to "give way with a will," in order to escape the very obvious danger.

But it was too late. The moment that it was observed that their destined prey had taken the alarm, a terrific volley of musketry was poured into the boat, and the gallant young officer who had undertaken the chief risk of the expedition fell forward into the bottom of the boat, dead and riddled with bullets. The coxswain also and two of the crew were more or less severely wounded. The boat was as speedily as possible taken out of range, and though, when it was found that there was a prospect of her escaping, some of the batteries opened upon her, and two or three boats started from the

shore in chase, she reached the "Victory" without further mishap, about an hour and a half from the time when she started upon the disastrous expedition.

Much grief was felt throughout the fleet at the loss of this gallant and promising young officer, whose distinguished services at the evacuation of Toulon, as well as his kindly and genial disposition, had made him universally liked and respected.

After this, there was no further talk of obtaining information respecting the condition of the enemy.

But the idea had taken hold of me, and I had thought about it until I had become completely fascinated.

It certainly seemed to me a preposterous piece of presumption that I should flatter myself I could succeed where an older and much more talented officer had failed, but the idea had got into my head, and the more I thought of it, the more sanguine did I become of success.

I had, after much thought, evolved a scheme which appeared to me so very promising that I determined to put it to the test without delay, taking care, however, not to breathe a word of my purpose to any of the officers, because I felt certain that after the late lamentable failure, no further attempts of a like kind would be permitted.

I needed assistance, however, to carry this notable scheme into effect, and I accordingly took little Bobby Summers into my confidence.

The "Mouette," I ought to mention, had been brought round with the rest of the fleet, and was occasionally employed in communicating between the ships and the forces on shore. Bobby and I retained our former posts in her, and as she was required at all hours of the day and night, we had removed our chests and hammocks to her little cabin, merely visiting the old "Juno" at odd times, to maintain our connexion with her, when we had nothing else in particular to do.

This arrangement was most favourable to my scheme, inasmuch as it allowed of my embarking upon it unmolested, and it also rendered little Bobby's assistance available at whatever moment I might require it.

There seemed to be only one serious difficulty in my way, and that was the want of a really good and effective disguise; and this difficulty was quite unexpectedly removed by the merest accident.

I had taken Summers into my confidence, and had received from him a prompt promise of his heartiest co-operation; the first dark night therefore which followed upon the unfolding of my pur-

pose to my enthusiastic shipmate, we took the first steps necessary to its accomplishment.

I am, as I think I have already mentioned, an excellent swimmer, and it was upon the possession of this accomplishment that I chiefly based my hopes of success. My plan was simply to row in as near the shore as possible, accompanied by Summers, in the cockleshell of a dingey belonging to the "Mouette," and then quietly slip into the water and swim the remainder of the distance. The dingey in question was so very diminutive a craft that I felt sure we might under favourable circumstances get quite close in without being discovered.

The first thing which I considered necessary, was to ascertain the set and rate of the tide, such as it was ; and to do this, we started away in the dingey one very dark night, armed with a cutlass and a brace of pistols each, and paddled leisurely in toward the shore.

We arrived in due time within about half a mile of the harbour's mouth, and then laid upon our oars to watch the drift of a small piece of plank, painted white, which we launched overboard, keeping the boat just far enough away to prevent her influencing its course, while at the same time able to distinguish its position pretty clearly.

We had been occupied thus for nearly an hour, and had seen enough to very nearly satisfy me upon the point in question, when, at no great distance away, we heard a sound as of some one laying in an oar upon a boat's thwart.

Curiosity at once urged us to ascertain, if possible, the source and meaning of this sound, as we felt pretty confident it could proceed from no boat belonging to the fleet, and we easily arrived at the logical conclusion that it must therefore proceed from some boat belonging to the enemy. Abandoning, therefore, our float to its fate, we loosened our cutlasses in their sheaths, and our pistols in the belts which supported them, and very cautiously paddled in the direction from whence the sound appeared to proceed.

We had not gone very far when we heard the sound of voices speaking in a low tone, apparently just in-shore of us, and we accordingly turned the boat's head in that direction.

As we proceeded, the sound of talking rapidly became more distinct, and at length we were near enough to distinguish that the speakers, whoever they were, were conversing in French.

At this point we rested on our oars again, and peered eagerly into the darkness in the endeavour to see something of our neighbours.

After perhaps a minute's intense gaze shoreward, Bobby leaned over, and whispered,—

“There they are, right ahead, and close under our bows. It is a boat, with two men in her, and as nearly as I can make out, they are leaning over the side and hauling something into the boat.”

I looked intently in the direction indicated, and at length succeeded in making out the craft. There were, as Bob had said, two men in her; they were leaning over the side, and as I watched, one of them raised his arm, and I detected, just for a moment, the faint glitter of some object just beneath it. At the same instant a voice said in French,—

“Here is another, and a fine fellow he is, too. He will make a splendid dinner for the general to-morrow.”

“Fishermen, by all that is lucky!” I exclaimed, in an excited whisper. “Now, Bob, let's dash alongside and board the craft; a selection from the rig of those two men will make exactly the rig I want.”

“All right,” returned Bob. “You're the skipper, give the word, and we'll nab the Mossoos in a jiffy.”

“Now!” said I.

We dashed our oars into the water, and in half a dozen strokes were alongside the astonished fishermen.

As the two boats touched, Bob laid in his oar, and with the dingey's painter in one hand and his drawn cutlass in the other, leaped on board the stranger, treading as he did so upon a mass of fish which lay writhing and flapping feebly in the bottom of the boat, and instantly assuming, quite unintentionally on his part, you may be sure, a sitting position amongst the thickest of the slimy, scaly cargo. As he boarded forward, I did so aft, and presenting a pistol in each hand, as sternly as I could, while struggling to suppress my laughter at Bob's exploit, ordered the fishermen to surrender, and to keep perfect silence, upon pain of instant death as the penalty of disobedience.

The poor fellows were taken completely by surprise, and seemed to have no idea of resistance. They meekly cast off that portion of their lines which still remained overboard, and taking to their oars, pulled quietly away in the direction which I ordered, or towards the “Mouette,” the dingey being in tow astern.

As we, or rather they, rowed off to the cutter I questioned the men as to their reason for running so great a risk for the sake of a few fish, and in reply gained the information that the garrison, though still in possession of a moderate supply of food, foresaw that a time of scarcity was rapidly approaching; and the general had,

accordingly, a few days previously taken the remaining provisions under his own control, issuing to each inhabitant a daily ration upon a very reduced scale. Under these circumstances, the fishermen of the place thought they saw their way to a good market for any fish they could contrive to capture, and a few of them had accordingly ventured out at night with their hooks and lines.

This was most valuable information, *if true*, but coming from the enemy I thought it scarcely reliable—though the men spoke with the utmost freedom, and apparently in perfectly good faith. I therefore determined, while slightly modifying my original plan, still to carry it out.

On our arrival on board the “Mouette,” I invited our two prisoners down into the cabin, and pouring them out a stiff “nor’wester” each, to cheer them up a little and loosen their tongues, I told them frankly that it was necessary I should make my way into Bastia, and intimated to them, that as they would be retained as hostages until my safe return, and liberated immediately afterwards, it would obviously be to their interest to give me all the information and help in their power to enable me to provide for my safety. I also informed them that it would be necessary for me to borrow certain portions of their habiliments, to be used as a disguise.

“It is a dangerous game which you are about to play, monsieur,” remarked the elder of the two, who gave his name as Jean Leferrier. “The greatest precautions are taken to prevent the access of spies into the place. Most of the inhabitants are well known, and any stranger would certainly be noticed and sharply questioned as to how he came there, and upon what business. I greatly fear you will be arrested before you have been three hours in the place. If monsieur will condescend to accept the advice of a poor, ignorant fisherman like myself, he will abandon his idea, and not embark upon so hazardous an enterprise.”

This, however, I would not listen to for a moment, in fact every word spoken only made me the more determined to go on; and this I intimated pretty plainly.

“Perhaps if monsieur were to adopt the *rôle* of an escaped prisoner from the British fleet he might succeed in disarming suspicion,” remarked Pierre Cousin, the other prisoner. “Monsieur’s accent is certainly not quite perfect (if he will pardon my presuming to say so); still it may pass without attracting much notice, and if you, Jean, were to give him a note to *la mère*, she could take him in and look after him,—that is, if monsieur could endure the poor accommodation to be found under her roof.”

“Certainly,” replied Jean, “that might be done. But mon-

sieur would have to report himself to Monsieur le Maire immediately on his arrival, and would therefore have to be prepared with a good detailed plausible story."

I replied that I thought I could manufacture a story which would hold water sufficiently to satisfy the functionary referred to, the thought flashing into my mind that I could personate the lad whom we had found in charge of the "Mouette" on the eventful evening of her capture.

"Then if monsieur is still determined to pursue his adventure, I will write the letter," remarked Jean.

"Do so at once, by all means," said I. "Tell her that, venturing too far out, you have been made prisoners by a boat's crew from the British fleet, and that you found, on board the ship to which you have been taken, another prisoner, who had contrived to make preparations for his escape, and that you had only time to write this note, informing your mother of your whereabouts, and recommending the bearer to her good offices, before he proceeded to put his plans into execution, the night being favourable for the attempt."

"There is no time like the present," I continued to Summers. "The night is dark, and altogether favourable for the enterprise. I have the locality fresh in mind, so I shall go at once."

"And when do you intend to return?" asked Bob.

"Ah!" I replied, "that is more than I can tell you. You may depend upon it, I shall not stay an hour longer than is absolutely necessary for obtaining the required information, but whether I shall be able to get out again when that is obtained, it is impossible to say. There is one thing you must do, Summers, and that is, keep a constant look-out, from the time I leave you until I turn up again, and if you observe anything unusual in-shore, leading you to suppose I am attempting to get out, do the best you can to help me. I shall leave a note with you for the skipper, explaining what I intend to do; and that note I want you to take on board, and deliver into his own hands, the first thing in the morning."

I then set about writing the note, and by the time that I had finished, Jean had also brought his communication to a close. He passed it over the table for me to read, and I found that it was substantially to the same effect as I had suggested, but written in his own homely and not very precise style of composition. I looked it very carefully through to see that there was no covert suggestion therein of a character intended to betray me; but as far as I could see it was a perfectly straightforward affair from beginning to end.

This matter settled, I borrowed a pair of breeches, and the long

boots belonging to one of them ; and the dirty ragged canvas overalls of the other ; topping off with a dilapidated blue worsted cap which I had been wearing continually since joining the "Mouette," and my rig-out was complete.

I intended pulling boldly ashore in the boat belonging to the captured fishermen, that being infinitely preferable to my mind to swimming ashore as I had originally proposed ; so, as soon as I was ready I sat down once more, and questioned them very minutely respecting the position of the landing-place, the locality of *la mère's* domicile, and everything else I could think of likely to be of service in my undertaking.

Jean, the elder of the two, replied freely to all my inquiries ; adding such information as suggested itself to him at the moment, and winding up by saying,—

"Monsieur must not be surprised if he is challenged on entering the harbour, that is almost certain to occur ; and if it does he has only to give the watch-word, and he will not be further interfered with."

"And what is the watch-word ?" I asked.

"Simply '*Bateau-pêcheur ; Bastia*,'" he replied. "If you are challenged give the pass-word, and lie upon your oars ; that will show them that you are one of us, and you will at once receive permission to proceed."

"Very well, I think I am pretty well primed now, and may venture to start. Good-bye, Bob, old fellow. Keep a sharp lookout, and bear a hand with your assistance if you see that I need any when returning. And don't forget my letter to the skipper."

"All right, never fear ; I'll remember everything. I only wish I could have gone instead of you, Chester. If you succeed it will be no end of a feather in your cap, but if you fail"—he concluded the sentence with a pantomimic gesture expressive of strangulation. "But there," he added, "I've no fear of that ; I never saw such a fellow as you for pulling through ; good-bye, old boy ; ta-ta ; 'be sure you write.'"

And he wrung my hand heartily ; with a gay laugh upon his lips, but something very like a tear glittering in his eye, as the feeble rays of the cabin lamp struggled through the skylight and fell upon his face.

I stepped into the heavy, clumsy, and slimy boat belonging to the fishermen ; and, shipping the oars, shoved off and gave way for the shore ; a faint twinkling light here and there in the town serving to guide me upon my proper course.

It took me nearly two hours to reach the harbour ; the boat being

heavy, and the oars much more cumbersome than any I had ever handled before ; but I passed in between the two piers at last ; and as I did so a dark figure appeared on the extremity of one of them, looming up indistinctly against the dusky sky ; and a voice exclaimed sharply, in French,—

“ Who goes there ? ”

“ *Bateau-pêcheur ; Bastia,* ” I replied composedly, resting on my oars at the same time.

“ You are late, comrade,” remarked the sentry. “ What luck ? ”

“ Very poor,” I replied. “ I have only been able to find half my lines, the darkness is so great ; and in searching for the others I have lost a good deal of time.”

“ Ah,” returned he, “ you are lucky to have found any of them. Pass on, *monsieur le pêcheur ;* and good night.”

“ Good night,” I shouted back, stretching out at the oars once more, and rowing laboriously up the harbour against a slight ebb-tide.

I had no difficulty in finding the landing-place. It was a sort of slipway leading down from the top of the quay to the water's edge ; and some ten or a dozen other fishing-boats were either hauled up there, or moored alongside. There was not a soul to be seen about the place when I ranged up alongside the green and slimy piles of which the slipway was constructed ; I was consequently able to moor the boat at leisure, and in such a way that if I wanted her again in a hurry, I should have no difficulty in quickly casting her adrift.

I then gathered up the fish and placed them in a basket which was stowed away in the eyes of the boat ; and throwing the rope strap over my shoulders, trudged with my load up the slipway until I stood upon the top of the quay.

I had been very minute in my inquiries as to how I was to proceed on landing, so as to be able to go direct to the abode of Dame Leferrier ; and the fisherman Jean had been equally minute and careful in directing me ; I had only to stand a few seconds, therefore, as though taking breath after the steep ascent, and look carefully about, to recognize the landmarks which he had given me to determine the direction I ought to take.

A low and villainous-looking waterside tavern stood at the corner of a street at no great distance, dimly visible in the light of a grimy lantern which swung over the door ; and making for this, and keeping it on my right, I found myself in a narrow, wretchedly-paved street ; up which I passed for about a couple of hundred yards, when I found myself opposite a rickety little hovel, having

a light burning in its window. I was directed to look for such a light in the house to which I was bound ; and as this appeared to be the only place in the street so distinguished, I walked boldly up to the door, raised the wooden latch, and entered.

I found myself in a small, low-ceiled room, stone-paved ; with a heavy wooden table in the centre, having a rough wooden bench on each side ; a couple of three-legged stools against the wall ; a pair of clumsy oars and a boat-hook in one corner ; a boat's mast and sails in another ; a fireplace, with a few smouldering logs, over which was suspended an iron pot, occupied nearly the whole of one side of the room ; and, by the side of the hearth, with her back toward me, sat an old dame, leaning forward with her elbows on her knees, gazing, half-asleep, at the almost extinct fire.

On my entrance, she rose wearily to her feet, and looked round in feeble surprise, but without any sign of perturbation at seeing a stranger before her.

"Have I the honour to address Madame Leferrier ?" I inquired, with as polite a bow as the heavy fish-basket on my back permitted me to make.

"I am Dame Leferrier," she replied. "Who are you, young man ? As far as my dim eyes will allow me to judge, I have never seen you before."

"You are quite right, madame," said I. "I am a perfect stranger to you. This note, however, from your son Jean will tell you who I am."

"A note from Jean !" she exclaimed. "What is the meaning of it ? Why is he not here, himself ?"

"I am sorry to inform you that a slight misfortune has befallen him," I replied. "He and his comrade Pierre are at present prisoners in the hands of the English ; but they will no doubt soon find the means to escape, as I have just done."

"Prisoners !" she exclaimed. "*Mon Dieu !* what will become of them ? And what," she added, "will become of *me*, now that I have lost the support which they only would give me ?"

"Be not distressed, madame," I replied, "either on their account or your own. They will be treated with the utmost kindness, prisoners though they are ; and, for yourself, I shall need a home until I can get out of Bastia and return to my own ; and if you will give me shelter, I am both able and willing to pay you well for it."

I still held the note in my hand, and as I ceased speaking I offered it her again.

"Read it out to me, monsieur, if you please," said she. "My

sight is but poor at the best of times ; and is certainly not equal to reading poor Jean's letter by this light."

I accordingly read the letter over to her, and when I had finished, she remarked,—

"Poor boys ! poor boys ! Prisoners ! Well, well, it cannot be helped. We must be patient, and trust to the mercy of *le Bon Dieu*. And now, monsieur, as to yourself. You are doubtless hungry and tired. Here is the supper which I had prepared for my two ; alas ! they are not here to eat it ; but draw up, monsieur ; put the basket in the corner there, and draw up to the table. You are heartily welcome to such as a poor widow has to give ; and when you have satisfied your hunger I will show you to your bed. It was my boy's—my poor Jean's—ah ! will he ever sleep on it again ?"

I drew up to the table, in accordance with the poor old soul's invitation ; and while partaking of what turned out to be a very savoury meal, did my best to cheer her up with the hope of speedily seeing her Jean once more.

My meal concluded, she conducted me up a rickety, worm-eaten staircase, to a small room above that which we had just left ; and indicating one of the two beds therein as the one belonging to her Jean, and the one, therefore, which I was to occupy, bade me good night and retired.

I must admit that, now I had fairly embarked upon my adventure, I found there were certain physical discomforts incidental to it, which were by no means to my taste. Thus, the disguise upon which my safety to a great extent depended, consisted of clothing the reverse of clean, and though it was certainly odoriferous enough, the perfume was by no means that of "Araby the blest." Then there was my lodging. It was moderately clean, perhaps, compared with the condition of a few of the places in the immediate neighbourhood ; but ideas of cleanliness, like ideas upon many other matters, vary, and this place, though doubtless considered scrupulously clean by the rightful occupants, was sufficiently the reverse to make me really uncomfortable ; and for a short time I abandoned myself to reflections the reverse of self-complimentary with regard to the impulse which had led me into such a situation. But the fact remained that I was there ; and common-sense suggested the desirability of making the best of the situation ; I accordingly arranged matters as comfortably as I could, and flinging myself upon the coarse pallet was soon wrapped in a dreamless slumber.

My first business in the morning was to find out and report myself to the *maire*. I had given a great deal of consideration to

this matter while rowing ashore on the previous night, weighing carefully the arguments for and against such a course ; and had finally arrived at the conclusion that, though such a proceeding would undoubtedly be fraught with great danger, yet it would in reality be the safest thing to do. The great thing to avoid was the exciting of suspicion ; and the surest means of achieving this seemed to me to be, not the actual *courting* of observation, certainly, but the careful avoidance of anything which seemed like shunning it.

Accordingly, after an early breakfast, during the discussion of which I easily extracted from my unsuspecting hostess all the information necessary to enable me to find my way to the various points I deemed it most important to visit, I shouldered my basket of fish, and set out on my way to the residence of M. le Maire.

As I slouched heavily and leisurely along the streets, affecting as nearly as I could the clumsy gait of a common seaman on *terra firma*, I glanced carefully about me to note such signs as might make themselves visible of the state of things within the town. It was not however until I reached the more respectable business quarter of the town that I was able to detect much. Then I observed tickets in the windows and on the stalls, announcing the various articles for sale—and especially provisions—at *only*—such a price—and exorbitantly high these prices were, too.

I soon had reason to see that my resolution to report myself was a wise one ; for I had not proceeded far on my way before I found myself the subject of sundry suspicious glances, and shortly afterwards a corporal of infantry hurried up behind, and, laying his hand upon my shoulder, exclaimed,—

“Halt, friend, and give me your name and place of residence, if you please. You are a fisherman, apparently, yet two of your own people have just pointed you out to me as certainly a stranger.”

“I *am* a stranger, comrade,” I replied composedly. “I only arrived in Bastia late last night, after effecting my escape from the British fleet two hours previously. Two of the fishermen belonging to this place—Jean Leferrier and Pierre Cousin by name—venturing too far off shore last night, were pounced upon and made prisoners by a boat belonging to the fleet. They were placed in irons, and confined between the same two guns as myself, and learning that I intended trying to escape, they directed me how to find my way on shore, and how to behave when here ; giving me also a note to convey to Madame Leferrier. I am now on my way to the house of M. le Maire to report myself.”

“Good !” exclaimed my unwelcome companion ; “I will

accompany you there, and show you the house, since you are a stranger."

I did not, of course, dare to manifest any objection to such a proposal, or I should instantly have been made a prisoner, if indeed I might not consider myself in reality one already.

I accordingly acquiesced in the most cheerful manner I could assume ; and we trudged on together, I describing, in response to the corporal's questioning, the details of my assumed escape.

Just as I had finished my recital, we arrived at the corner of a street, and my companion stopped.

"This," said he, "is the street in which M. le Maire resides. But before we go further, may I ask, comrade, what you are going to do with those fish in your basket?" casting at the same time a hungry glance over my shoulder.

"Well," said I, "they really belong to poor Jean Leferrier and his mate ; and I intended asking M. le Maire to accept one or two of the finest of them, after which I should sell the remainder, and hand over the proceeds to Jean's mother, who I find depended entirely upon her son for house, food, and clothing. But I suppose one or two more or less will not make much difference to the good dame, especially"—a bright idea striking me—"as I intend going out to-night and trying my luck ; so if you would like a bit of fish for dinner and will accept one or two, make your choice, comrade ; you have been very kind in guiding me thus far, and I am sure you are heartily welcome."

I was about to unsling the basket from my shoulders, as I spoke, but he hastily stopped me.

"You are a good fellow, *mon ami*," said he, "and I accept your offer. But not here—it would never do for me to be seen here in public accepting such a present ; it would be sure to get to our general's ears, and I should be simply flogged for my presumption. Why, if you had not told me yourself that you are a stranger, I should have known it at once, from your ignorance of the value of the contents of your basket. Why, we are closely besieged, *mon cher* ; provisions are growing scarce, and your fish are worth—well—almost their weight in silver. Come this way ; never mind M. le Maire, he would only send you on to the general's quarters to report yourself there ; so you may as well save your intended present to him—or, better still, hand it to the general's cook, and that will insure you from all further trouble in the future, especially if you happen to make a point of leaving a little bit of fish at the general's whenever you happen to be passing that way. Ah ! here we are at the barracks !"

We turned in, as he spoke, through a pair of large, high folding gates of wood, thickly studded along the top with sharp iron spikes, and I found myself in the barrack square, a large open space, surrounded on three sides by buildings, and on the fourth—that side which abutted on the street—by a wall about twenty feet high.

The edifice, which occupied the whole of that side of the square facing the street, was an extremely ancient structure, and had evidently been at one time a castle of considerable strength. The walls were constructed entirely of masonry, apparently of great solidity ; but the age of the building, and the ravages of time were plainly indicated by the stained and weather-beaten appearance of the stone-work, as well as by the way in which the exterior surface of the masonry had crumbled away, leaving the once smooth face rough and jagged, with frequent indentations, where stones had become loosened in their setting and finally dislodged altogether. The chief entrance to the building was through a high and wide semicircular archway, of considerable depth, adorned with crumbling pillars and half-obliterated mouldings, flanked on each side by solid and bold projecting buttresses. The lower storey of the building was lighted by good-sized windows of modern construction, which had evidently been pierced in the walls at no very distant date ; but above this the original narrow slits in the masonry which did duty as windows still remained. A short flag-staff, from which, the tricolour fluttered in the morning breeze, surmounted the central portion of the building, which, from its superior height and apparent strength, I judged must have originally been the keep.

The two adjacent sides of the square were occupied by plain brick buildings, three storeys high, which evidently constituted the men's quarters.

My companion conducted me across the square to the great centre door already mentioned, and, on our safely reaching the shelter of its deep recess, bade me place my basket on the ground. I did so ; whereupon—first glancing round to see whether there were any curious eyes turned in our direction, and apparently satisfied that there were not—he stooped down, and planting himself well in front of my basket, hastily selected a couple of moderate-sized fish, which he thrust up inside his tunic. This done, he seized a wooden handle which hung at the extremity of a rusty chain issuing from a small aperture in the wall, and tugged smartly at it. The result was a clanging from a large bell, imperfectly heard in the remote distance of the interior.

A minute or so elapsed ; and then a wicket, cut in the wood-work

of the door, opened ; and an individual in plain clothes, apparently an officer's orderly, became visible inside.

"Can Monsieur Lemaitre be seen?" inquired my companion.

"Doubtless," replied the individual to whom the question was put. "Come in, Jacques. What do you want with him?"

"That I will tell him myself, comrade, when I see him," responded Jacques, passing through the wicket and beckoning me to follow ; which of course I did.

"As you please, *mon ami*," replied the other ; and without further parley he departed to apprise that important personage, the general's cook, that he was wanted.

In the interval I employed myself in looking round me.

I found myself in a sort of entrance-hall of considerable size. The wall opposite the door contained a huge fireplace, sunk in the thickness of the masonry. The side walls were pierced, on my right and left, with semicircular archways, deeply moulded, and closed with strong wooden doors ; and on the left, a massive and elaborately carved stone staircase, of much more modern date than the building itself, led upward to a stone gallery which ran all round the wall, with doors communicating with the apartments above. The hall ceiling, two storeys above the pavement, was of stone, groined ; the ribs of the groins boldly moulded, and massively keyed in the centre with a stone of considerable size, boldly carved with the representation of a dragon or griffin coiled into a circle. Over the great fireplace hung a trophy of rusty and dented armour, surmounted by another trophy of faded and dusty silken banners ; and two other flag trophies adorned the side walls.

By the time that I had completed my survey, a sound of shuffling footsteps was heard ; and immediately afterwards there emerged from a passage underneath the staircase, a short, stout good-tempered-looking personage, dressed in a blouse and military trousers, with a cook's cap on his head, and a long white apron in front, reaching from his neck almost to his feet. He held a huge meat-knife in one hand, and a basting-ladle in the other. As he approached, my friend Jacques hastily informed me in a whisper that this was Monsieur Lemaitre.

In answer to this individual's inquiries, the corporal related the story of my pretended escape from the enemy, hinting also my desire to report myself to the general ; and winding up with a description of my anxiety to procure M. Lemaitre's acceptance, on behalf of the general, of the pick of my basket.

I began dimly to see that the general—whoever he was—was a much-dreaded individual ; and that this present of fish, suggested

by my friend the corporal, was intended by him, in all kindness, as a bribe, whereby I might obtain as favourable an introduction as possible to the presence of the great man.

Monsieur Lemaitre stooped down and, with much deliberation, turned over the various fish which I had brought, finally selecting a quantity of the choicest, amounting to about half my stock, which he laid upon the stone pavement of the hall. This done, he, in a very gracious and patronizing manner, assured me I might count upon his best services to obtain for me an early interview with his master, and retired ; promising to send some one forthwith to remove the fish he had selected.

The moment he was out of sight, my friend the corporal turned to me, and congratulated me warmly upon the favourable reception which had been accorded me by the great man's great man ; congratulating himself, at the same time, upon the opportunity which had been afforded him of rendering a service of some little importance to a stranger. As he spoke thus, he cast such an expressive glance into my fish-basket, that there was no possibility of my misunderstanding him. Accordingly, when he immediately added that, as he could now be of no further service to me, he would take his departure, I uttered a few words of thanks for his kindness ; and expressed a hope that he would oblige me by making a further selection of fish, as a slight token of my gratitude.

"Well, comrade," said he, "since you are so anxious about the matter, I will ; and I do it all the more readily since—between you and me—you will find these fellows about here such sharks that you will have to part with every fish in your basket before you will get an opportunity of reporting yourself. For my part, I detest such greediness ; nothing is more abhorrent to a sensitive soul like mine ; I consider that it ought to be baulked and discouraged in every way ; and in order to aid in so good a work as far as possible I will just take this—and this—and these three—under my own care. And now—good-bye, comrade—nay, no thanks ; you are heartily welcome ; and I wish you a pleasant interview with the general."

Saying which he hastily retired through the wicket ; just as a sound of footsteps along the passage under the staircase announced the approach of Monsieur Lemaitre's assistants.

CHAPTER XX.

HOW THE ADVENTURE TERMINATED.

THE new-comers proved to be a couple of the kitchen servants. They were provided with a basket, in which they removed the fish selected by Monsieur Lemaitre, taking them up and conveying them away without vouchsafing to favour me with so much as a single word.

The time passed on without any one else appearing ; a silence, as if of the grave, prevailed in the building ; and had it not been for the bugle calls in the adjacent barrack-yard, the shouts of command and the measured tramp of the men at drill, together with the loud and frequent boom of artillery from the walls, and the fainter echo of our own ordnance in the distance, I might have supposed myself to be in a deserted city.

At length the tramp of horses became audible outside ; the sound increased rapidly ; and in another minute I became aware that a cavalcade of some sort had approached the great door of the building ; then there came the sound of champing of bits, the clatter of accoutrements, the jingle of spurs, and loud voices talking and laughing. Finally the heavy latch of the door was turned, one leaf swung heavily back upon its well-oiled hinges, and a group of some fourteen officers entered the hall ; among whom was one who I had no doubt was the general.

The majority of the officers merely glanced carelessly at me and passed on ; one of them, however, apparently a lieutenant, stopped and asked me what I wanted.

I replied by telling him shortly the story I had arranged ; adding that I had been advised to come up and report myself to the general. When I had finished he ordered me to follow him ; and we made sail in the wake of the others ; passing through a door at the far end of the hall, which led, not, as I had supposed, to a room, but to a long passage terminating in a yard, in one side of which was an archway leading through the building into the barrack-yard,

and on the opposite side a group of one-storey buildings, the first of which appeared to be a sort of guard-room.

Entering this room, in which were some twenty men, who rose and saluted my conductor as we passed, we continued on through it into another and very large room, the tables in which were strewed with plans and drawings.

Here we found a great many of the officers who had preceded us, engaged in unbuckling their swords, &c., preparatory, as it seemed to me, to sitting down to work upon some of the drawings which lay scattered about.

Crossing this room also, followed by curious glances from many of its occupants, we paused before a door, at which my guide tapped.

"*Entrer,*" exclaimed a voice from the inside.

The lieutenant turned the handle, threw open the door, and passed into the other apartment, signing to me to follow. I did so, and found myself in a small but very comfortably furnished room, containing a press full of papers, a case of books, half a dozen chairs, and a large writing-table, at which the individual whom I had rightly taken to be the general was just seating himself.

He was a man apparently between fifty and sixty years of age, a trifle above medium height, thin and spare of body, with a bronzed complexion, and grey hair and moustache, both cut quite short. His eyes were dark and piercing; the expression of his features severe and cruel; and his beauty—if he ever had any—was completely destroyed by a great ghastly scar which reached from the outer corner of his right eyebrow to his chin, splitting both the upper and under lip in its course.

"Well, St. Croix; what now?" exclaimed he sharply, as we entered.

"I have taken the liberty of introducing this man to you at once, sir," said my guide. "He informs me that he is an escaped prisoner from the English fleet; and that in accordance with advice received, he wishes, as a stranger in the town, to report himself to you and to be duly registered."

"Call Montrouge here."

The lieutenant retired into the adjoining room, and presently reappeared, accompanied by another officer; the general, meanwhile, taking no notice whatever of me, but busying himself in searching among a large bundle of papers which lay on the table.

On the entrance of the two officers, their surly senior looked fiercely at the new-comer, and pointing to the opposite side of the table said,—

"Sit down there ; take paper ; and note down what this fellow has to say for himself."

Then turning angrily to me, he ordered me to proceed.

I told my story ; stopping at intervals, when desired, in order that the officer who was taking it down might properly follow me. When I had finished, the officer called Montrouge was ordered to read over to me what he had written ; and at the close I was asked by the general if that was a correct transcription of my story.

I replied that it was.

I was then ordered to give all the information I possessed with regard to the fleet ; its strength ; number and calibre of guns ; and so on.

To this I replied that having been confined during the whole of my captivity between two guns, on the lower deck, I had had no means of gaining any information whatever, either upon the points mentioned, or indeed any others.

My statement was received with a look of incredulity and a dissatisfied grunt.

"What think you, gentlemen," exclaimed the old martinet, "does this young man's story strike you as being truthful ?"

"It sounds plausible enough," replied the officer called Montrouge. "I see no reason to doubt it."

"What is your opinion, St. Croix ?"

"I believe it to be the truth," replied the individual addressed.

"Good ! We differ slightly in opinion, that is all, gentlemen," remarked the general. "For my own part, I am convinced that this story"—striking disdainfully the written statement, which he held in his hand—"is a simple tissue of falsehood. Luckily, we possess the means of putting the matter to the test. Send for Guiseppe the Corsican."

Guiseppe the Corsican ! the man who had sold me into the hands of the enemy once already, and who, I had every reason to believe, had betrayed Count Lorenzo di Paoli also. If this man and I were brought face to face, I was hopelessly lost.

At that moment, and not until then, did I feel what a shameful and despicable course of conduct I had entered upon. I had not only assumed voluntarily the *rôle* of a spy ; but I had sought to shelter myself beneath a cloak of falsehood ; and now, out of my own mouth was I to be judged—and surely condemned.

I felt thoroughly crest-fallen and humiliated ; not so much at my certain detection as a spy, but at having placed myself in a position where deliberate falsehood had become an absolute neces-

sity to my safety, which after all it had not only failed to assure, but had hopelessly compromised.

A long and—to me—most painful pause ensued, neither of the officers questioning me further. Had they done so, I feel certain I should have thrown off the mask and avowed myself to be that hateful thing, a disguised and secret enemy.

At length a tap came to the door ; and Lieutenant St. Croix, who had gone out in search of Guiseppe, returned, bringing the man with him. A single glance was sufficient to satisfy me that my former enemy once more stood before me.

He approached the table, and, saluting the general, stood waiting, as it seemed to me, with some trepidation, to learn why he had been summoned to the dreaded presence of the chief.

“Attention, sir !” exclaimed the general harshly. “Do you recollect the circumstances connected with the theft of Captain Leroux’s yacht, ‘Mouette,’ from Ajaccio ?”

“Perfectly, sir—I mean, monsieur,” he replied.

“Did you happen to know the lad who was taken away in her ?”

“Francois ? Yes, I knew him,” he replied.

“Is he at all like this fisherman ?” asked the general.

The fellow turned his gaze on me with an expression of stolid indifference. Regarding me steadfastly for a full minute, I saw his eyes brighten and gleam with an expression of fiendish malice ; he approached me so closely that his hot breath fell full upon my cheek, his eyes glaring into mine like those of a tiger when he scents blood ; then, turning to the general, he replied,—

“No, *monsieur le général*. This is the young naval officer who conveyed the despatches to Count Lorenzo di Paoli, and who, it is believed, stole the ‘Mouette’ on the night when the count’s chateau was attacked ; afterwards leading the ‘Vigilant’ into an ambush whereby she was captured.”

“Are you certain ?” inquired the general.

“Quite certain,” replied the Corsican. “It was I who watched him land from the frigate, and afterwards discovered his lurking-place in the woodman’s hut. And I also saw him frequently, after his escape from the troops, in the chateau of Count Lorenzo.”

“That is sufficient,” replied the general. Then, turning to me, he remarked sarcastically,—

“If you have anything to say in refutation of this man’s statement, say it. But no, I see you have not. It is well, sir. You have chosen to enter this town in disguise and with a false story ; the inference is plain. You are a spy ; and as such you will be shot at daybreak to-morrow morning.”

"Take him away," he continued, turning to Lieutenant St. Croix ; "confine him securely in the tower ; and you, Guiseppe, take charge of him ; I can spare none of my own men to play the part of gaoler. And remember, I shall hold you responsible for his safety !"

"I will answer for it with my own life," exultingly exclaimed the scoundrel, as he roughly seized me by the collar and led me away.

As we passed through the guard-room, Lieutenant St. Croix summoned a file of soldiers, who promptly placed themselves one on each side of me ; and in this humiliating manner I was conducted to the prison from which, in a few short hours, I was to go to my grave.

On leaving the guard-room, we crossed the small open court, and passed under the archway into the passage which led through to the barrack-yard.

Midway through the passage we came to a halt before a low door of solid oak, which was opened with the aid of a ponderous key, when a steep narrow stairway of stone lay before us. It wound upwards, corkscrew fashion, in the thickness of the wall, and, ascending it, we eventually reached a stone landing or short passage, very dimly lighted by two narrow unglazed windows, one at each end. There were two doors on each side of this passage, one of which the young officer unlocked and flung open, motioning me to enter. I did so, seeing that I had no choice in the matter ; the door slammed heavily to, the massive bolts grated harshly back into their places, and I was alone.

It was so dark that, until my eyes became accustomed to the gloom, I could see nothing except a narrow opening in the wall, far above my head, which admitted all the light and air the architect had considered necessary for the miserable occupants of the dungeon.

I shut my eyes, and clasped my hands tightly over them, keeping them so for about five minutes ; and when I opened them again, I was able to see with tolerable distinctness.

I then found that I had been thrust into a chamber about ten feet square and as many feet high, the walls of which were of massive masonry. A stone bench ran along one side of the wall, and that was all ; furniture of any kind there was absolutely none. The aperture in the wall, which I have already mentioned, was close up under the stone ceiling of the cell, and measured about two feet long and six inches wide. So thick was the wall in which this was pierced, that standing back against the opposite wall I was unable to see the sky out through it. I felt all round the walls of my prison. They were perfectly smooth, and slimy with the accumulated damp of centuries. I then examined the door. It was of

oak or some other hard wood, and evidently very thick, from the dead sound which my knuckles made when I rapped upon it. It was quite useless, then, to think of escape. So strong, indeed, was the place, that they had not thought it worth while to search me, being no doubt convinced that it would be impossible for me to break out with any tools or weapons I might happen to have in my possession. I had a stout knife in my pocket ; but five minutes' work with it on the door satisfied me that it would be a labour of days, instead of the few hours which remained to me, to carve my way out with such an instrument.

Nothing then remained but to devote those few remaining hours to the work of preparation for my inevitable fate.

I flung myself down upon the rough stone bench, and let my thoughts wander far away to my dear old Hampshire home, and to the loved ones there whose hearts the vague tidings of my uncertain fate would go far to break. They would of course hear, through Captain Hood, of the mad venture upon which I had embarked ; and would doubtless also be furnished with full details of my doings up to the moment when I disappeared from Bob's lingering gaze into the darkness of the murky night. And from that moment all further trace of me would be lost, unless indeed Bastia should eventually fall into the hands of the British ; and even then it was improbable that, in the general bustle and excitement, any one would remember to make inquiries about me. And so the years would drag slowly on ; and while my body lay mouldering in an obscure and unmarked grave, those loved ones would be hoping against hope for tidings of me, until, under the long-continued and cruel strain, their hearts would slowly but surely break.

The subject was of too painful a character to be longer dwelt upon ; and I turned from it to seek in my hour of need the support and consolation of religion. I recalled to mind some of those sublime passages, so lavishly scattered through the pages of the "Book of Books," each solemn word breathing comfort, hope, and promise ; but the words chased each other idly through my throbbing brain, which refused to grasp their meaning ; turning aside instead to interest itself in all manner of idle fancies. Then I strove to quell the tumult of my mind by earnest prayer ; but it was of no use ; words came readily enough to my dry and fevered lips ; but they were words only, not aspirations of the soul. And so at length I had to abandon my useless efforts and allow my thoughts to be dragged away a helpless prey to every mad fancy born of my whirling brain. And all the while I was conscious that the sands in the hour-glass of my life were fast running out, and

that the precious moments which were passing so swiftly away bore with them the possibilities of an eternity of bliss or an eternity of woe for me beyond the great Boundary Line which I was so soon to cross.

And thus the hours sped swiftly on, until a thin shaft of golden light streamed in through the narrow opening above my head, and, striking on the opposite wall, gleamed there for a few minutes in radiant and dazzling beauty, passing obliquely upward the while until it grew narrower and more narrow, dwindled down to the thinness of a thread, and finally vanished. I had witnessed the last gleam of earthly sunlight I was ever to see.

Darkness now rapidly gathered round me ; and in a short time it was impossible for me to distinguish anything but the faint outline of the loophole in the wall above me.

As night descended upon the earth, a soft and gentle breeze sprang up, which, entering through the loophole, cooled my fevered blood and permitted me so far to regain control of myself that I once more became cognisant of outward sounds, of which I seemed to have lost all consciousness from the moment I had been thrust into that horrible dungeon. There was the roar of the artillery, the fainter boom of our own guns, the occasional rattle of vehicles along the street, the rumble of heavy ammunition waggons, the frequent clatter of horses' feet ; and, now and then, the sound of a human voice. Gradually most of these sounds lulled, and became more infrequent, until finally they died away altogether ; and long intervals of perfect silence ensued, broken only by the occasional crashing discharge of a single gun. And so I knew that night had fallen upon the earth without as well as upon the unhappy prisoner within.

After the lapse of some hours, as it seemed to me, I became conscious of a faint sound outside my prison-door ; a key rattled in the lock, the bolts jarred back ; the door was flung open ; a stream of light flooded the cell, blinding me for the moment ; and when my eyesight returned Giuseppe the Corsican was standing in the chamber, in the act of closing the door carefully behind him.

Placing upon the floor the small hand-lamp which he carried, he flung himself carelessly down on the stone bench ; and, with an evil smile hovering about his lips, began to jeer at my unfortunate situation.

" Well, signor Englishman," he commenced, " how like you your new lodging ? It is scarcely so large, and I fear it is not as elegantly furnished, as Francesca Paoli's silken chamber, is it ? But never mind, my friend ; your stay here is but short ; and I daresay you

can contrive to put up with a little temporary inconvenience in the meantime, can you not ? ”

“ Are you here to make sport of my misfortunes ? ” I asked.

“ Certainly,” he replied ; “ what other purpose do you suppose I could have in visiting you here in the dead of night ? Perhaps you thought I had come to set you free and help you to rejoin your accursed countrymen ? No ! I hate you all—you Englishmen—and *you* especially ; and I could not deny myself the pleasure of looking in upon you to see how you face the approach of a disgraceful death. I am rejoiced to see how pale and haggard you look. It has told upon you, as it must necessarily tell upon all cowards. Let me note carefully how you look, now ; so that I may compare it with your appearance a few hours hence, when you face the muskets of your executioners. Pah ! why you are quailing already, you white-livered poltroon ; what will it be in the morning ? ”

I had resolved the moment I perceived the villain’s object, that nothing he might say or do should wring any outward manifestation from me. But as he went on, the apathy which had before possessed me gave way under the influence of his taunts ; my indignation was gradually aroused until my blood boiled ; and now, rising suddenly, I sprang upon him with the bound of a tiger, clutching his sinewy neck with both hands and pressing my thumbs with all my strength into his throat.

The ruffian was so completely taken by surprise by the suddenness and violence of this unexpected attack that he went down unresistingly before me, the back of his head striking violently upon the hard stone bench upon which he had been seated.

I was now fully roused ; I felt possessed of the strength and fury of a demon ; and, still retaining my vice-like grasp upon his throat, I raised his head again and again and again, only to dash it with intensified violence against the stones each time. The miserable wretch grasped at the knife in his belt and drew it out ; but before he had time to use it I had dashed his head yet once more against the stones, with such superhuman strength and violence that a dull crushing sound accompanied the blow, the man uttered a deep groan, and the knife fell clinking on the floor from his nerveless hand. Relaxing my grasp upon his throat, I raised the lamp and allowed its rays to fall upon my victim’s face. It was of a livid purple hue. The tongue, hanging out of the mouth, was bitten nearly through ; his whiskers were wet with blood, which oozed in two thin streams from his throat where I had grasped it ; and a slowly widening pool of blood was steadily spreading over the bench beneath his head.

The first thought which presented itself was, "Is he dead, or merely stunned?" The next—which flashed into my brain with the rapidity of lightning—was, that there lay my gaoler, the man who stood between me and liberty, helpless before me; and the chance of escape was once more in my hands.

I rolled the senseless body off the bench on to the floor. It fell, and lay there motionless; the muscles all relaxed, and the same livid hue upon the face.

Hastily unrolling the crimson sash which encircled his waist, I cut it into convenient lengths; and, rolling the body over face downwards, quickly and with all the dexterity of a seaman secured the arms together at the wrists, and the feet at the ankles; after which I lashed the heels and hands close together, rolled the body back as far as it would come, and thrust into the mouth, as a gag, the long haft of his murderous sheath-knife, securing it in position by means of the handkerchief which he wore round his throat.

I next possessed myself of the keys, of which there were two; one, of course, for the cell-door, and the other, doubtless, for the door at the foot of the stairs.

I had no difficulty in fitting the right key to the cell-door; and as soon as I had done so I blew out the lamp, and placed it outside the cell, closed and locked the door, and, removing my boots, stealthily crept down the winding staircase.

The door at the bottom was open; and as it folded inwards I noiselessly adjusted the key in the lock before venturing outside. I then stepped through the doorway; drew the door quietly to, and, with the utmost precaution, turned the key in the lock, managing to do so with very little noise.

As I removed the key, and stood back in the recess to deliberate upon my next steps, I became conscious of the sound of running water; and looking along the passage into the barrack-yard, and the courtyard at the back of the tower, I saw, by the faint light of one or two lamps, that the ground was flooded, and that it was raining heavily. So much the better; there would be fewer people about, and my chances of escape would thereby be all the greater.

The first question was, how to get beyond the boundaries of the barracks. The front or barrack-yard was bounded on three sides by lofty buildings and on the fourth by a high wall, with gates in it, it is true, but gates which would be closed and locked at that hour of the night. The difficulties of escape by way of the front were great, and might very possibly prove insurmountable; I therefore determined to make my first attempt at the back.

Keeping close within the deepest part of the shadow, I moved cautiously in the direction of the guard-room ; and had just gained the courtyard when I heard footsteps entering the passage behind me. I darted out from under the archway, and hastily concealed myself behind one of the massive buttresses which supported the back wall of the building. Peering cautiously out from my hiding-place, I saw the individual, whoever he was, emerge from the archway, cross the yard, and enter the guard-room.

Still crouching close behind the buttress, I looked carefully round to note the possibilities of escape which presented themselves in the rear of the tower. The yard, like the one in front, was enclosed by a wall, but it was only about twelve feet high. On the other side of this wall, looming indistinctly up against the murky sky, were some trees, one or two of which appeared to be near enough to enable me to spring into their branches, could I but reach the top of the wall.

At first I could see no way of doing this. But a little closer scrutiny, and the exercise of a little consideration, at length suggested a means of escape. A sort of wing, projecting out from the main building of the old castle, formed one boundary of the courtyard, and joined the wall, the top of which I desired to reach ; and I suddenly remembered the rough, uneven, and time-worn appearance of the masonry of this building which had attracted my attention in the morning. I thought that perhaps the masonry might be rough and uneven enough to permit of my climbing the face of it ; and, as it seemed to be the only road of escape, I resolved to try it.

I accordingly made my way to the point which I had resolved to attack, and set about the attempt. But I was unable to manage it. I found I required something more than the slight hold I was able to obtain with my hands, while working my way upward with my feet ; and after a trial which must have lasted quite an hour I found myself just where I had started ; namely, on the pavement of the courtyard.

Trembling with my violent exertions, and weak from my long fast (I had neither eaten nor drank since breakfast the previous morning), I was almost on the point of despairing, when a bright idea occurred to me. I would attempt my climb at the point where the wing jutted out from the main wall of the building, the two walls forming an angle.

A stream of water was pouring down the wall from somewhere off the roof ; and I took a hearty draught from this, which greatly refreshed me. I then renewed my attempt ; and found to my great

satisfaction that, though the labour was still severe, I was able to make slow but steady progress by bracing myself into the angle between the two walls with my arms and knees.

In this way I gradually worked my way up the wall, until I arrived at a point where a bold moulding—called, I believe, a string-course—ran horizontally along the wall. I continued my climb until my feet rested upon this moulding, which constituted quite a firm foot-hold compared with what I had hitherto been able to obtain.

I was now about five-and-twenty feet from the ground ; and had it been light I should have been able to see over the wall ; but as it was I could distinguish nothing but the indistinct masses of the trees, and, among them, a few greyish objects which looked to me like tomb-stones.

The next thing was to pass along the face of the wing-wall to the point where it joined the boundary-wall of the courtyard ; and the sooner this journey was accomplished the better ; for the muscles of my hands were beginning to feel cramped and nerveless from the extraordinary strain which had been put upon them. I accordingly set out on my dangerous way ; and, with the aid of the string-course, got on better than I expected ; but my strength was going so rapidly that, by the time I had accomplished about a quarter of the distance, it was all I could do to support myself. I had no choice, however, but still to push on ; and I persevered a short time longer ; when, just as I felt that I was incapable of further effort, when my nerveless fingers were actually relaxing their hold upon the slight irregularities in the surface of the wall, and I felt that I must go helplessly crashing down again to the ground, I distinguished, within a yard of me, on my right, a dark cavity in the face of the wall ; and the remembrance at once flashed upon me that I had noticed when crossing the yard in the morning, without paying any attention to it at the moment, a large window in this part of the wall. One more feeble but despairing effort enabled me to reach the opening ; and with a frame quivering with exhaustion, and an incoherent thanksgiving upon my lips, I flung my body forward, and lay, breathless and half-fainting, partly in and partly out of the unglazed window.

After recovering myself a little, I raised myself into a somewhat more secure and comfortable position, and took a good look round me.

It was still as dark as ever—a circumstance at which I greatly rejoiced, since it would still take a considerable amount of time to make good my escape—but my eyes had by this time become so

accustomed to the darkness that I was able to discern with some degree of clearness such objects as happened to be in my immediate vicinity ; and the first thing I noticed was that there was another window at no great distance from me, but it was pierced in the *end* wall of the building, and consequently overlooked the piece of ground which I took to be a cemetery. The next thing which attracted my attention was a sort of ledge about a foot wide on the inner side of the wall, which had apparently, at some time or other in the history of the building, supported a floor. This ledge seemed to offer an easy and safe approach to the other window ; and I at once scrambled in through the opening wherein I was perched, and, lowering myself cautiously down on the inside, soon had the satisfaction of finding my feet firmly planted on the ledge. Somewhat restored in strength, and my nerves steadied by my short rest, I set forward once more ; and at length, without much difficulty, gained the other window.

Peering anxiously out through it, to see what facilities might exist for enabling me to effect a descent, I was overjoyed to find that the time-worn wall was covered with a thick growth of ivy. A descent by means of this was, after my perilous climb and passage along the face of the wall, a mere trifle ; and in a couple of minutes more I was standing, safe and sound, in the burial-ground, and *outside* the boundaries of my prison. I wasted no time in looking about me ; but rapidly crossing the enclosure, and stumbling over the graves as I went, I soon reached a high railing, which was easily surmounted, when I found myself in a dark and lonely road, bounded on one side by a wall and on the other by a steep descent thickly planted with trees.

Pausing here for a moment, I rapidly recalled to mind the route by which I had arrived at the barracks on the previous day, and was by this means enabled to decide upon the direction which I ought to take in order to reach the harbour. This point settled, I stepped quickly out ; and after two or three turns and windings, found myself in a street which I remembered passing through before.

The rain was still pouring down in torrents, and not a soul was to be seen in any direction, nor a sound heard ; and if any one had seen me flitting noiselessly along the silent and deserted street, I should assuredly have been taken for a washed-out ghost, for I had left my boots behind, and my feet gave only a faint, scarcely audible, pit-pat on the flooded causeway.

Half an hour of sharp walking brought me down to the harbour ; and I at once proceeded to the slipway where I had moored the

boat on the previous night. The previous night? Ay ; it was only some twenty-four hours since I had entered Bastia ; but it seemed as though I had been there at least a month.

The boat was still there, with several others ; and as my own safety was just then of more importance to me than any one else's convenience, I did not hesitate, on finding a much smaller and lighter boat among them, to help myself to her.

Casting the little craft adrift, I shipped the oars and paddled leisurely down the harbour until I approached the pier heads, when, noiselessly laying in my oars, I shipped one of them in the notch at the stern ; and, sheering close in under the walls of the pier from which I had been hailed on the previous night, I sculled gently out to the open sea. I almost held my breath until I had gone far enough to lose sight of the pier altogether in the darkness, when I once more shipped my oars and pulled steadily out toward a line of twinkling lights which indicated the position of the fleet.

The dawn was just breaking, grey, cheerless, and chill, as I reached the cutter and stepped in on deck over her low bulwarks, wet to the skin, nerveless from exhaustion and hunger, and with my feet, elbows, and knees lacerated and bleeding from my battle with the rough stone walls of my prison.

CHAPTER XXI.

LE NARCISSE.

MY first act on regaining the cutter was to rouse Bob and the boy who officiated as cook on board the "Mouette ;" with the object of obtaining from the former any news he might have to impart, and from the latter as substantial a breakfast as the resources of the cutter would permit.

I listened to Bob's story while engaged upon the highly necessary operation of cleansing my person and encasing it once more in "the uniform proper to my rank." Bobby had very little to tell me ; and that little was by no means reassuring. It appeared that a despatch-boat had arrived from Malta on the previous day bringing letters for the fleet ; and, among the rest, there had been a couple of epistles for me. Bob had gone on board the "Juno" for whatever letters there might be for the cutter's crew, and had been ordered by the skipper to request my presence on board. Thereupon master Bob had presented my note informing the skipper of my proposed expedition. Instead of expressing his gratification at my zeal, as Bobby had fully expected he would, it appeared that the skipper had exhibited a very considerable amount of irritation ; finally ordering friend Robert somewhat peremptorily back to the cutter, with instructions to send me without fail on board the "Juno" immediately on my return, *if* (which the skipper seemed to consider highly improbable) I ever succeeded in returning at all.

By the time that Summers had brought his story to a close I was ready for the breakfast which meantime had been preparing ; and as it was still much too early to present myself before Captain Hood (who seldom appeared before eight bells) I sat down to the meal, with—it must be confessed—a somewhat diminished appetite ; hastily skimming through my letters as I munched away at the weevily biscuits. There were two ; one from my dear old dad, and one from Sir Peregrine. There was nothing of very special interest

in either ; my father's epistle dealing chiefly with a few items of home gossip, such as that farmer Giles of the Glebe had met with an accident in the hunting-field, his colt falling with him and breaking the worthy farmer's leg—doctor pronounced it a compound fracture ; that the wife of Lightfoot, the gamekeeper, had presented her husband with twins once more—two girls this time ; mother and twins doing well ; that old Jane Martin had been laid up all the winter with rheumatism, &c., &c., &c. ; and that finally, all at home were enjoying excellent health, and would be glad if I could find time to write to them a little more frequently. My great-uncle, Sir Peregrine, was not nearly so voluminous in his correspondence as my father—sailors are not as a rule very good correspondents—what he had to say was said in as few words as possible. Two pages of note-paper sufficed the worthy admiral to inform me that he had been intensely gratified at the terms in which my name had been mentioned in connexion with the storming of the Convention Redoubt, and that he was writing per same mail to "his friend Hood" (the admiral, not the captain), asking him to give me as many opportunities as he could of distinguishing myself—"or of getting knocked on the head," thought I ; and that if I needed any cash my drafts upon him would be duly honoured. Also, that he had not been out much during the winter, his old enemy the gout having attacked him so pertinaciously that he had been confined to the house for weeks at a time, moored "stem and stern" before the library fire, like a prison-hulk in Portsmouth Harbour !

My letters and my breakfast were got through in about the same time ; and as Bob and I emerged from our tiny cabin on to the cutter's narrow deck the ship's bells were musically chiming out the eight strokes which proclaimed the end of one watch and the commencement of another. The skipper would, I knew, be stirring by this time, so I jumped into the dingy, and proceeded on board the frigate.

As I stepped in on the "Juno's" deck, Captain Hood made his appearance at the cabin-door. Touching my hat, I went up and reported myself.

"Good morning, Mr. Chester," observed he affably ; "I am very glad to see you have come safely out of your escapade. But what do you mean, sir" (assuming a tone of severity), "by presuming to undertake such an expedition without asking and obtaining permission ? It is a manifest breach of discipline, and, as such, must be punished. I placed you in charge of the cutter as a kind of promotion, and by way of reward for your exemplary conduct generally. Now I shall be compelled to deprive you of your

command. You will return forthwith to your duty on board the frigate, sir."

"Ay, ay, sir," I responded, considerably crestfallen. "I am extremely sorry to have incurred your displeasure, sir, I am sure. I *would* have asked permission, sir, but I was afraid that, after poor Mr. Tupper's death, it would be refused."

"Very well, Mr. Chester. I have no doubt you *meant* well, and therefore I have been lenient in the punishment which your breach of discipline demanded. You have been reprimanded on the quarter-deck, sir, and so we will say nothing more about it. Only I must impress upon you the necessity of being careful to avoid a repetition of the offence. Now come into the cabin and have some breakfast with me, and you can then tell us how you fared among the Frenchmen. If you have not already breakfasted, Mr. Annesley" (to the first lieutenant, who at this moment approached), "I shall be glad to have the pleasure of your company."

So saying, the skipper turned on his heel, and led the way into the cabin, where we found the table well provided with a variety of good things highly provocative of appetite in a midshipman, even though he might have partaken of one breakfast already within an hour.

As soon as we had seated ourselves, and were supplied from the stock of delicacies before us,—

"Now," said the skipper, "overhaul your log, Mr. Chester, and let us hear how you managed to conduct your difficult enterprise. That young scamp, Summers, told me all about your gallant capture" (with just the faintest possible ironical emphasis on the word *gallant*) "of the unfortunate fishermen, so you may as well commence at the point where you left the cutter in their boat."

In obedience to this command I at once proceeded with my story, giving a detailed account of everything that had happened from the time of leaving the cutter to the moment of my return.

My auditors evinced the greatest interest in my narration, and were mightily tickled when I described the manner in which I had been relieved of my fish by the condescending cook and the friendly corporal. Their interest increased when I described my imprisonment in and the mode of escape from my dungeon ; and when I had finished they both congratulated me very heartily upon what Captain Hood called "the resolution and courage" which I had exhibited.

"It was a remarkably narrow squeak, Mr. Chester," remarked the skipper, "and I hope it will be a warning to you not to unnecessarily expose yourself to danger for the future. When duty calls it is of course quite another thing ; and I am perfectly willing to

give you credit for a desire in the present instance to perform a very important service. I have already reprimanded you for the breach of discipline which you committed in undertaking this expedition without first obtaining leave ; let me now express my satisfaction with the way in which—apart from that—you have conducted yourself. You have succeeded in obtaining information which, I believe, will be of great value to the admiral, and I will endeavour so to represent your conduct to him as that he shall view it in a favourable light. Now, if you have finished breakfast, you had better go on board the cutter and transfer your chest and hammock to the frigate, and by-and-by I will take you on board the flag-ship and introduce you to the admiral, when you can make your report.”

Accepting this as a hint to be off about my business, I rose, and making my bow, left the cabin.

On reaching the deck I found that the whole of the inmates of the midshipmen's berth, already apprised by the loquacious Bob of my escapade, were anxiously awaiting my reappearance, to learn all particulars, including the result of my private interview with the skipper. Briefly informing them, however, that I had been ordered to rejoin the frigate, and postponing all further information until a more convenient season, I hurried down over the side, and stepping into the cockle-shell of a dingy pulled on board the “*Mouette*,” where master Bob received my narration with a show of sympathy which thinly veiled his exultation at being left in sole command of the cutter.

Somehow I did not greatly regret the change. I was beginning to tire of the cramped accommodation on board the “*Mouette* ;” and although I had been formally reprimanded for my “breach of discipline” I was acute enough to see that my conduct had, after all, made a favourable impression upon the skipper, and that I had, on the whole, risen, rather than fallen, in his estimation.

Hurriedly bundling my few belongings together and stowing them away in the boat, I shook hands with Bob, and was soon once more on board the “*Juno*.”

I had barely time to trim myself up a bit, when a message was brought me to the effect that the skipper's gig was alongside, and only waited my presence on board to shove off for the admiral's ship.

The “*Victory*” was lying at no great distance from us, and we were soon alongside.

I followed the skipper up the side-ladder, and found myself in the presence of the admiral, who was taking a constitutional up and

down the quarter-deck in company with Sir Hyde Parker and Vice Admiral Hotham from the "Britannia."

Captain Hood immediately joined company (I remaining discreetly in the background, in accordance with previous instructions), and in the course of a minute or two the party, no doubt in consequence of a suggestion from the skipper, retired to the cabin.

In about twenty minutes afterwards I was sent for.

I entered the cabin with, I must confess, some slight degree of trepidation ; for the admiral was a very queer sort of man in some respects, and one never knew in what light he would be likely to view such an exploit as mine. I had known of his having disgraced more than one luckless mid for a far less heinous offence than so serious a breach of discipline as that of which I had been guilty ; and disgracing was the one thing which presented itself to me as more objectionable than anything else in the shape of punishment—except flogging ; but I built my hopes upon the skipper's good offices ; and the result showed that I had no grounds for fear.

On entering, I was invited to take a chair which Lord Hood pointed out, and then, waiting until the cabin-door was shut, he rested his elbows on the table, and supporting his chin upon his hands, looked across at me and said—

"Your captain informs me, young gentleman, that, understanding I was anxious to obtain information respecting the condition of the enemy in Bastia, you voluntarily undertook a most hazardous journey thither, and were enabled, during your stay in the town, to make observations of considerable value. I should like to hear from your own lips a detailed narrative of the adventure."

Thus commanded, I once more told my story, Lord Hood interrupting me from time to time to jot down memoranda in his note-book. When I had concluded my narration the admiral thanked me heartily for the "very important service" which I had rendered, and I was also complimented by my audience upon "the skill and intrepidity" with which I had carried out the reconnoissance. Taking these last remarks as a polite intimation that the interview was at an end, I bowed and withdrew. A few minutes afterwards the admiral's boat was ordered, and as soon as she was manned, Lord Hood, Sir Hyde Parker, and the skipper got into her, and pulled away for the British lines on shore—Captain Hood directing me, as he passed down the side, to take his gig back to the frigate.

On the following day a flag of truce was sent into the town

negotiations were opened, and on the 22nd of May, 1794, the garrison capitulated on very favourable terms to themselves.

From this date I find nothing in my diary worthy of remark until we come to the reduction of Calvi on the 10th of August following. I was at the time recovering from an attack of low fever, and had been off duty for some four or five weeks.

On the evening of the capture I was walking slowly up and down the poop, when Captain Hood came up the poop-ladder and very kindly inquired after my health. I replied that I was getting rapidly stronger, and should be very glad when the doctor would allow me to return to duty.

"Ah ! yes," said he, "I daresay you will. Very irksome to be idling about the decks all day. I should think change of air would do you good."

"I believe it would, sir," I replied, thinking from his manner of speaking that he had a proposal of some sort to make.

"Yes, no doubt about it," returned the skipper. "And you would like it? Then be so kind as to find Mr. Malcolm" (the surgeon), "and ask him to step into my cabin for a moment, if he is disengaged."

Certain now that there was something in the wind, I lost no time in hunting up the worthy medico and delivering the skipper's message, which I supplemented by a request upon my own account, that if any proposal were made to send me away upon another expedition, the doctor would kindly throw no difficulties in the way.

To which the cannie Scotchman replied,—

"Before makin' any sic a promise, I'll just bide a wee and speir a few particulars anent the nature o' the said expedition, laddie. If it's o' a nature to prove benefeecal to your health—why then I'm no saying but what I may be induced to do what I can to forward your views ; but no' itherwise."

I watched him into the cabin, and then "stood off and on" outside upon the quarter-deck, awaiting his reappearance.

I had not long to wait. In less than five minutes he came out upon the quarter-deck, and seeing me, beckoned me to approach.

"It's a' right, laddie," said he. "Just gang ben til him"—pointing to the cabin—"and tak' your instructions. It's just the vera thing I wad hae prescribed for you had it been possible to hae had the prescription mad' up. But ye'll no gang oot o' the ship until ye hae been to me for a wee drappie phecsic ye maun tak' along wi' ye, d'ye mind?"

I promised the kind-hearted old fellow I would be sure to do his bidding and then joyously entered the cabin.

“Sit down, Mr. Chester,” said the skipper, when I made my appearance. I took the chair which he had indicated, and he then proceeded,—

“The admiral has some important despatches to send away, which he is anxious should reach England as speedily as possible. The ‘Vigilant’ will take them hence to Gibraltar, and the admiral there will be requested to despatch a frigate with them for the rest of the journey, as Lord Hood thinks the ‘Vigilant’ scarcely fit to cross the Bay of Biscay. The only question has been who to send with them, as there is still a great deal to be done before the fleet can leave the island, and there are no officers to spare. Lord Hood mentioned the matter to me, and I immediately thought of you. You will have nothing to do but simply navigate the craft to Gibraltar, which, I learn, you are quite able to do ; and it will be a pleasant change for you—beneficial, too, Malcolm says. There is only one thing I feel called upon to suggest to you, and that is—*caution*. Recollect that you are a despatch-boat, not a cruiser ; and let *nothing* which you can possibly avoid tempt you to delay the delivery of the despatches or endanger their safety. You are very young for such a trust, I know ; but you seem to have as much tact and discretion as a good many of your seniors, and I see no reason why you should not execute the service satisfactorily. At all events I have answered for you, and I trust you will do all you can to justify my good opinion of you. You had better shift your traps over to the ‘Vigilant’ at once, and then proceed on board the admiral’s ship for the despatches and your instructions, as he is anxious for you to sail at once.”

I thanked the skipper heartily both for the thoughtfulness and consideration which had procured for me the change of air which seemed needed for my complete recovery, and also for the confidence in me which such a commission argued ; and I promised him most earnestly that the safe delivery of the despatches should be my paramount care.

“That’s right, Mr. Chester,” said he, as I rose to leave the cabin. “Before I say good-bye, I may as well mention that I have been greatly pleased with your conduct ever since you first joined the ship. I consider you a most promising young officer ; you have conducted yourself extremely well on more than one trying occasion, and I have procured this little commission for you in the hope that it will afford you still another opportunity of acquiring credit and advancing your interests. I wish you a quick and prosperous passage, and shall be glad to see your safe return. And as long as you continue to conduct yourself well, you may count upon me

as a *friend*, willing to do all that is possible to aid you. Now—good-bye ! and take care of yourself.”

So saying, he shook hands heartily with me, and then, flinging himself back once more in his chair, he turned to a number of papers which littered his table ; while I made my way out upon deck, scarcely knowing whether I stood upon my head or my heels, so overjoyed was I at the prospect of the trip.

In less than an hour afterwards I was on board the “*Vigilant*,” with the despatch-box safely stowed away in the most secret hiding-place I could find, and my instructions in my breast-pocket.

The night was lovely, not the faintest breath of air ruffled the surface of the glassy waters, in whose dark mysterious depths glittered a perfect reflection of every star which beamed in the blue-black vault overhead. So perfect was the stillness of nature that we could hear, with the utmost distinctness, the songs of the men on board the different ships, and even the talking and laughing on board those in our more immediate vicinity ; and when we rigged out our sweeps to sweep the craft into the offing, where I hoped we might the sooner catch a breeze, their roll and rattle seemed almost unbearably loud in contrast with the quiet which prevailed around us.

Having a good strong crew on board, I kept them at the sweeps for a couple of hours, by which time we had gained an offing of about eight miles, when I ordered the sweeps to be laid in and the canvas to be set. Shortly afterwards the moon rose, and, bringing up a nice little southerly breeze with her, we were soon slipping through the water, close-hauled on the port tack, and laying well up on our course for old Gib.

The skipper had been considerate enough to send with me another midshipman, a quiet, steady, and gentlemanly lad named Harold Smellie, a year younger than myself, and a boatswain’s mate named Tom Hardy, a very superior and well-educated man for his position, a prime seaman, and thoroughly reliable in every way. These two I put in charge of the watches, and then, having seen that everything was satisfactory on deck and in the look of the weather, I went below and tumbled into my hammock, leaving of course the stereotyped charge to be called in the event of anything “turning up” out of the usual way.

On awaking next morning, I found that the breeze had freshened very considerably during the night, so much so indeed that when I went on deck the “*Vigilant*” was tearing through it with her lee-rail under, although the lateens were reefed to their utmost capacity. There was a very awkward jump of a sea on already, and it was

fast increasing ; but the light beamy little craft, although she tossed the spray in blinding showers from her weather-bow right aft and out over her lee quarter, never shipped a drop of green water, and I was highly delighted at her excellent sea-going qualities. I thought, however, that she would take the seas much more easily if she were relieved of the strain and leverage aloft of her long heavy swaying yards ; I therefore had the lateens taken in and the lugs substituted for them, and was rewarded for my trouble by finding my anticipations amply realized.

The wind continued to increase all through the morning, and by noon it was blowing quite a fresh gale, with a correspondingly heavy sea.

At five p.m. the look-out reported a sail about two points on our weather-bow.

"What do you make her out to be?" demanded I.

"She looks large enough for a frigate," replied the man ; "but I shall have a better sight of her in a few minutes, sir ; she is steering this way."

"I say, Chester, suppose it's a frigate from Gibraltar with despatches for the admiral ; what will you do?" exclaimed young Smellie, as we stood together by the weather-bulwarks, hanging on to the main-rigging.

"There is only one thing that we *can* do, and that is, exchange despatches, and each return as quickly as possible to our respective starting-points. It will be a great bore if we are obliged to cut short our cruise ; but our despatches are urgent, and our duty plainly is to forward them with all possible speed ; and as this vessel, if she prove to be a frigate, will almost certainly be a much faster craft than ourselves, we shall be in duty bound to put our despatch-box on board of her."

"How will you get them on board?" inquired my companion. "It would be a very ticklish business to launch a boat in this sea."

"We must get near enough, if possible, to effect the exchange without the aid of a boat," returned I. "With care on both sides I think it might be safely managed. What does the stranger look like by this time?" I continued to the look-out.

"Seems to me that he has a very Frenchified look about him, sir," replied he.

"Phew ! I hope not," said I to Smellie. "Lend me your glass a moment, will you? Mine is down below. I think I'll take a trip aloft and see what I can make out about him."

I accordingly went aloft to the fore-yard, and sitting astride it,

close to the parrals, took as good a look at the fast-approaching craft as the swaying of the yard and the lively motion of the little "Vigilant" would permit.

I remained there for quite ten minutes, and by the end of that time felt perfectly satisfied as to her nationality. She was French, from her truck downwards, without a doubt.

This was an extremely awkward *rencontre*, and one which I scarcely expected. Indeed, our own frigates were at that time so thoroughly scouring the Mediterranean, particularly that portion of it lying between Gibraltar and Malta, that an enemy's ship was almost the last object we might expect to see.

"I'm afraid we're in a mess here," said I to Smellie, as I joined him aft, by the companion. "That fellow is a Frenchman, and he has the weather-gage, to say nothing of his ability to sail round and round us in this weather, if we took to our heels. Now, the question is, how can we hoodwink him and slip through his fingers?"

"Perhaps we could personate some other craft of about our size and rig," suggested little Smellie doubtfully.

"Um! possibly. Let's get the French navy list, and just run through it. If there's anything at all like ourselves we shall soon find it."

My companion dived down below, and in less than a minute afterwards returned with the list and the French signal-book.

We turned it over together, and presently came upon a craft named the "Vidette," which seemed, from her description, to be almost a sister-ship to the "Vigilant." We accordingly determined to assume her name during the communications which would soon pass between us and the frigate. The French ensign was bent on, and we then turned up the "Vidette's" number, and bent these flags also on the halliards, after which we could do nothing but wait.

Suddenly a thought struck me. There were several old red nightcaps still on board, which had been found when the vessel fell into our hands. These I at once routed out, and made each man on deck don one instead of his sou'-wester; we were then effectually disguised, as the rest of our clothing was concealed by the oilskins which we were wearing to protect ourselves from the drenching spray.

We had scarcely finished our preparations when Smellie, who was watching the frigate through his telescope, reported that our unwelcome neighbour had hoisted the tricolour, which was of course a polite request that we would show the colour of *our* bunting.

"Run up the ensign and number," said I to the men who were stationed at the signal-halliards; and away went the bunting fluttering aloft, the flags all abroad, in the lubberly fashion which prevailed at that time in the French navy.

In a few seconds our signal was read; and, in response, up went the frigate's number, which little Smellie read out as it was going aloft. "Private-signal pennant. Eight, two, seven, four."

"Run up the answering pennant," said I to the signal-man, as I turned up the number in the signal-book.

"Le Narcisse" was the name corresponding to this number; and I was about to turn up the navy list, to learn what particulars I could respecting the craft, when my companion exclaimed, "More bunting. White flag with blue cross, diagonal. Three, nine, nought, one."

We acknowledged the signal, and, on turning it up, found that it was a request to "Round to under my lee: wish to communicate with you."

This brought the signalling to a close; and in about a quarter of an hour afterwards, we rounded to on the frigate's lee-beam, while that craft laid her main-topsail to the mast.

As soon as the two craft were within hailing distance a dapper little figure, dressed in the full uniform of a French naval captain, leaped into the mizzen rigging with all the activity of a monkey, and, raising his hat slightly in salute (which I of course scrupulously returned), gave a preliminary flourish or two with a speaking-trumpet almost as big as himself, and then, applying it to his lips squeaked out, in French of course, in a shrill falsetto which set all our people on the broad grin,—

"'Vidette ahoy!' Are you the guarda-costa of that name?"

"Ay, ay, monsieur," I briefly replied.

"Oh! very well," said he. "I am Citizen Alphonse Latour, captain of 'Le Narcisse' frigate, in the service of the French Republic. Whither are you bound?"

"We are cruising to the southward and eastward on the look-out for an English fleet which is reported to be somewhere hereabouts," I replied, with a mischievous desire to see what effect the mention of an English fleet would have upon him.

"An English fleet! *Hereabouts!!* DIABLE!!!" he exclaimed. "I should like to fall in with them. I hope, however, *they* will not fall in with my prize. Ah! Good!! Listen, monsieur, I fell in with and captured an English merchantman yesterday, with a valuable cargo on board. You shall oblige me by going on until you fall in with him—he is only about one hundred miles south-east

of us—and you shall escort him into Toulon ; while as for ‘ Le Narcisse ’—*parbleu*, she will remain here in waiting for the accursed English fleet, and fight them all when they shall arrive. Is it not so ? ”

“ Your orders shall have my best attention, monsieur,” I replied ; “ and I trust you will not have to wait long for the English. I have the honour to wish you a very good day.”

We raised our hats and bowed simultaneously ; the little French captain scrambled down out of the rigging ; I sprang off the low rail on to the deck ; and we filled away upon our course once more, leaving the fire-eating Frenchman with his topsail still to the mast, waiting for “ the accursed English.”

Little Smellie and I enjoyed a good laugh over the *rencontre*, now that it was past and we had escaped undetected ; and we united in a cordial hope that the gallant little skipper of “ Le Narcisse ” would have his wish for a meeting with the English speedily gratified.

He had, as we subsequently found out, but the result could scarcely have been satisfactory to him ; for when next I saw Malta “ Le Narcisse ” was in harbour there, a prize.

At six o'clock next morning we were fortunate enough to fall in with the prize—a barque of about 800 tons, loaded with various products of the East, forming, as Captain Alphonse Latour had truly remarked, a very valuable cargo—she had been steering a course which threw her fairly into our arms, so to speak ; and, as the weather had moderated, and the sea gone down a good deal we simply ran her on board, drove the astonished French prize-crew below, and took possession.

On instituting a search, we found that the astute skipper of “ Le Narcisse ” had taken out the entire crew except the second mate and three hands—whom he had left on board to assist in working the ship—so as to prevent all possibility of a rising and a recapture. We transferred the Frenchmen to the “ Vigilant ; ” put eight of our own men on board, in charge of young Smellie ; and then made sail in company for Gibraltar. As, however, the “ Vigilant ” sailed two feet to the barque’s one, we had run her completely out of sight by noon ; and we could only hope that she would reach the Rock in safety—which she luckily did, and we of the “ Vigilant ” ultimately netted a good round sum in the shape of prize-money on her account.

About three p.m. on the same day as that on which we took our prize, we made another sail dead to windward, steering the same way as ourselves, but rather edging down upon us. We must have

sighted each other simultaneously ; for, while still examining him with my telescope, I saw him bear up upon a course evidently intended to cut us off. The " Vigilant," however, continued to steer the same course as before ; my intention being to try the same trick with him—in the event of his being a Frenchman—which had succeeded so well with " Le Narcisse " ; and if he was an Englishman, I had of course nothing to fear.

In about another hour we had neared each other sufficiently to permit of our colours being seen ; and no sooner was this the case than the stranger flew her ensign—the English—and fired a gun for us to heave-to. I at once obeyed ; and in about twenty minutes afterwards she rounded-to within pistol-shot to windward of us and lowered a boat.

The day being fine I was of course in my ordinary uniform ; and I could not wholly conceal a smile at the look of disappointment and disgust which overspread the features of the officer in charge, as the boat approached sufficiently near to permit of his seeing that, whatever the ship might be, the crew were English.

I awaited him at the lee gangway ; and on his stepping up out of the boat, raised my hat in due form, a salute which he very gracefully returned.

" Well, young gentleman," said he, " what craft have you here, pray, and where are you bound to ? "

I told him briefly what we were, and so on ; and in reply to his questions, gave him a short account of the way in which the " Vigilant " had come into our hands, at which he seemed much interested.

" Well," said he, when I had finished the story, " I must say I am sorry you are not French ; for we should then have had an opportunity of making a prize of some sort, even though you would have been but very small fry ; but *anything* will be fish which comes to our net now. We have been knocking about here for nearly a month, and never a sign of a Frenchman have we seen during the whole time."

" Indeed ! " said I, " you *have* been unlucky ; but I hope your luck has now changed at last. Though you cannot make a prize of us, I think I can put you on the track of one."

" Ah ! do you indeed ? Come, that's a great deal better," said he, in a very different tone from that which had characterized his conversation hitherto. " My dear boy, pray let us have your news without further ado."

I accordingly described to him our meeting with " Le Narcisse," and mentioned Captain Alphonse Latour's enthusiastic and

patriotic determination to await on that spot the approach of the "accursed English;" concluding my story by giving the exact latitude and longitude of the place where our meeting with "Le Narcisse" took place.

When I had given him all particulars he rose to take his leave.

"Good-bye," said he, "and accept, through me, the thanks of Captain Lacey, the officers, and the whole ship's company of the 'Diamond' for the very valuable information you have afforded us. I only hope Monsieur Latour was sincere in his resolve; we will not keep him waiting very long. A pleasant passage to you and I hope your prize will get safely in. Lucky young dog, you are, and no mistake."

"Good-bye," I returned. "I wish you a speedy and pleasant meeting with Monsieur Latour."

And with another shake of the hand we parted. Poor fellow! he little knew what lay before him. The "Diamond" actually found "Le Narcisse" cruising about the spot I had indicated, and one of the shot of the Frenchman's first broadside took his head off.

Four days afterwards we anchored at Gibraltar just in time to hear the evening gun, having been favoured, during the entire passage, with a wind which permitted us to lay our course with every thread of canvas drawing to its utmost.

CHAPTER XXII.

“IN THE BAY OF BISCAY, HO!”

MY instructions were to see the admiral without the delay of a single moment, should we happen to arrive at any hour when the worthy chief might be reasonably supposed to be out of his bed; I accordingly had the boat lowered, and proceeded to the shore the instant that our anchor was let go.

When I reached the admiral's house, I found him busy at the entertainment of a party of “sodger officers” from the garrison.

I was shown into his private room; and in a few minutes the gallant old veteran stumped in on his wooden leg, and saluted me with,—

“Well, youngster, whose cat is dead now? Are you aware that I very strongly object to be troubled after business hours, unless the matter happens to be one of very great importance?”

“I must apologize for intruding upon you at so late an hour, sir,” I replied; “but my instructions are that I should not lose a moment in placing in your hands the despatches from Lord Hood of which I have the honour to be the bearer.”

“*You* have the honour! Despatches from Lord Hood? The d——ll!” he exclaimed. “Do you mean to say that *you* have charge of the despatch-boat signalled this evening?”

“I do sir, certainly,” I rather resentfully replied. The somewhat contemptuous emphasis he laid on the word *you* slightly nettled me.

“What, in the name of—um! um! What's your name, pray, young gentleman?” said he.

“Ralph Chester, midshipman, of the frigate ‘Juno,’ at your service, sir,” I replied.

“Ralph Chester, eh? Of the ‘Juno.’ Ah! um! Let me see. Um! Your name seems familiar to me. Where did I hear it before? *Must* have heard it before, somewhere; never make mistakes about names; *never*. Where did I hear it before, eh, youngster?”

“It is quite impossible for me to say, sir,” I replied. “The only

way in which an officer in your high position is likely to become acquainted with the name of an obscure midshipman is, it seems to me, through the Gazette."

"Gazette? Gazette? Oh, ay; to be sure. Yes, yes; certainly; that was it. 'Juno'—Captain Hood—of course. And are you the lad who distinguished himself so conspicuously at the storming of the Convention Redoubt?"

"I was named in the despatches in connection with that affair, sir," I modestly replied.

"Then I congratulate you most heartily, my boy," said he, shaking hands with me vigorously, and changing his hitherto gruff and somewhat churlish demeanour for one of almost paternal cordiality. "Ha! ha! you made the whole service your debtor that night, by helping your skipper to get into the breach before the red-coat. The rascals! They like to 'top the officer' over us, and claim to be the more useful arm of the service; but you gave us the pull on them that night, my boy, and no mistake. Poor Dundas! How awfully disgusted he must have felt. But—sit down, and let me see your despatches—we can talk afterwards."

I produced my box, and handed to him the letter from Lord Hood which was addressed to himself.

He hastily tore open the envelope, and soon ran over the few lines which formed the contents of the letter.

"Can't do it," he exclaimed, testily, crumpling up the letter in his hand. "Haven't a single frigate at my disposal; not even a corvette nor a despatch-boat—*nothing*, in fact, but my own barge. Sheer impossibility; so there's an end of it. Why, in the name of all that's ridiculous, could he not send one of his own frigates, so that these confounded despatches might have gone straight on? Much more sensible than to send them here in a little hooker which is not fit to cross the Bay of Biscay. *Why* is she not fit, eh? What's the matter with her?"

"There is nothing the matter with her, sir; nothing whatever," I replied. "It is only an idea of Lord Hood's that she is unfit to cross the Bay. She, no doubt, appears to him a mere boat, compared with the 'Victory,' but *I* should have no hesitation whatever about taking her across the Bay, or across the Atlantic itself, for that matter."

"Ah! Is that the case?" he quickly returned. "Um! um! That is a possible way out of the difficulty. Look here. I've a few red-coats in the other room, spending the evening with me; I shall be very glad to have the pleasure of your company for the remainder of the evening, if you will join us, young gentleman. I

can give you a bed here; and to-morrow I will go on board this little hooker of yours with you, and see for myself whether or no she seems fit to make the trip to England."

We accordingly adjourned to the dining-room, where we found some dozen or so of military men seated round the table, discussing their wine and cigars, chatting over the events of the war, and bewailing their own ill-luck in being shut up in Gibraltar instead of sharing in the miseries and glories (?) of the field.

I was introduced by the admiral to his guests as one fresh from the seat of the operations in Corsica, and was welcomed cordially and freely plied with questions of all kinds, to some of which, by-the-bye, I found it rather difficult to reply without exciting a feeling of jealousy in the breasts of the red-coats.

Fortunately, however, the evening passed without the occurrence of any incident of a disagreeable character; and at a late, or, more strictly speaking, at an early, hour next morning I turned in, so thoroughly tired that I felt scarcely able to remain awake until I had undressed.

About 7.30 a knock sounded at my door, and a voice announced—in tones which struck me as being somewhat tremulous with suppressed laughter—"Your shaving-water, sir." Now, I may as well confess that at this particular period of my life the one subject upon which, above all others, I was most sensitive was shaving. I shaved with the most scrupulous regularity every morning; but it was done furtively, so far, at least as my elders were concerned. In the presence of my fellow mids, the act was performed openly and with all due ceremony and solemnity—all the mids on board the "*Juno*" shaved—but I had noticed, upon more than one occasion, that any reference in the hearing of my elders to the punctuality with which I performed this duty was invariably received by them with a silence more eloquent than words, and with an expression of ironical incredulity which could only be adequately atoned for by the shedding of their heart's blood. Therefore I had ceased to refer to a subject the mention of which was invariably followed by much annoyance, and hence the preternatural sensitiveness which caused me to suspect, rather than to absolutely detect, a quiver of suppressed laughter in the voice of the man who on this morning awoke me with the announcement of "Your shaving-water, sir."

The temporary irritation arising out of this painful and humiliating suspicion had one good result, however; it effectually awoke me and enabled me to promptly turn out; while, but for it, the late hours of the previous night might otherwise have caused me to

doze off again, and so become guilty of the quite unpardonable offence of keeping an admiral waiting.

As it was, I was dressed and down in the breakfast-room so promptly that the admiral rather kept *me* waiting; which was quite a different matter.

By eleven o'clock however, we were on board the "Vigilant;" and after going carefully through and over the craft—accompanied by myself, Tom Hardy, and the carpenter's mate—the old boy came to the conclusion that she was strong enough to go round the world if required, and that he therefore need have no hesitation whatever about ordering us to proceed to England forthwith.

He would, however, he said, take it upon himself to detain us until evening; by which time he would have ready some despatches of his own, which he wished to forward.

We utilized the time by filling up provisions and water; a task which was left to the superintendence of Tom Hardy, while Smellie and I had a scramble through the gun-galleries and to the telegraph-station at the summit of the Rock; and just as the sunset-gun boomed out on the evening air we weighed and stood out of the bay, with a light north-easterly breeze, passing Tarifa Point shortly before midnight.

By breakfast-time on the morning but one following, we were abreast of Cape St. Vincent. Eighteen hours later, we made the Rock of Lisbon; and, on the fifth day out from Gibraltar, finding ourselves in the latitude of Cape Finisterre, we hauled up to the northward and eastward for Ushant; and entered the Bay of Biscay.

So far, all had gone well. We had been favoured with fine weather, and winds which, while somewhat inclined to be light and variable, had still allowed us to lay our course, and we had really made a very fair passage up to this point.

But we had scarcely entered the notorious Bay of Biscay when the aspect of affairs began to change.

The first omen of evil revealed itself in a steadily and rather rapidly falling barometer. The wind for the previous twenty-four hours had been moderate, and steady at about east, but toward evening it became fitful, now dying away until the roll of the ship caused the canvas to flap heavily against the masts, and anon freshening up again for a few minutes, quite to a seven-knot breeze. Then it would drop once more; and nothing would be heard but the heavy flap of the canvas, the creak of the spars, the *swish* of the water as it lapped in over our bulwarks—the craft rolling *gunwale-under*—and a low weird moaning of pent-up wind, which

seemed to be imprisoned in a heavy cloud-bank rapidly piling itself up on the north-western horizon. The sky, which had been clear all day, became overspread with a canopy of dirty lead-coloured vapour, between which and ourselves soon appeared small ragged patches of fast-flying scud. The moaning sound became louder and more weird and dismal in tone; while the sea—its surface curiously agitated by waves which leaped up and subsided without any apparent cause—grew black as ink.

Fortunately, we had ample and unmistakable notice of the impending change; and we fully availed ourselves of it by making every possible preparation for the expected gale, and adopting every possible precaution for the safety of our craft.

Our first act was to take in and secure our lofty lateen-canvas by getting the yards down on deck and firmly lashing them there; we then set a storm-jib and a leg-of-mutton mizzen, just to steady the craft and place her under command when the breeze should come. This done, we divided our crew into two parties, one of which, under the gunner's mate, secured the guns with extra breechings, while the other, under Hardy, battened down everything, and put extra lashings upon the booms and boats.

We were ready in excellent time; all our preparations being complete a good half-hour before the breeze came.

At length, about the time of sunset, a sudden break appeared in the mass of cloud piled up to the north-westward, revealing a long narrow strip of fiery copper-coloured sky; and at the same instant the wind, which had hitherto blown in fitful gusts, died completely away.

"Here it comes!" was the exclamation which issued simultaneously from a dozen throats, as the eyes of the more watchful caught the glare of the tawny streak of sky away on our port beam; and even as we spoke the roar of the wind became apparent; and far away on the verge of the horizon we caught a glimpse of the whitening water, as it was lashed into foam by the first mad fury of the approaching squall.

"Port your helm! Hard over with it!" I exclaimed; "and stand by to brail up the mizzen if she fails to pay off."

We had at the wheel one of the best helmsmen on board, a cool, smart, active topman; and, almost before the words were out of my mouth, he sent the wheel spinning hard over with a single jerk of his muscular arm, while Hardy mustered some three or four hands at the mizzen-brails.

The squall, however, furious as it was at its commencement, had spent its greatest strength before it reached us; and when it

struck the "Vigilant" it came with merely sufficient force to lay her down to her bearings for a moment, when she gathered way, and, answering her helm at once, paid off before it, and began to surge away to leeward at the rate of about six knots.

The squall proved to be merely the precursor of a strong but steady gale from the north-west ; and as soon as this became sufficiently apparent we hauled our wind once more and hove the craft to on the larboard tack under her jib and mizzen. This arrangement, while it promised to be the best that could be made for the safety of the ship and our own comfort, also enabled us to drift along at the rate of about three knots an hour on our proper course.

We found that under her short canvas the little "Vigilant," with her flat and beamy build, sharp lines, and flaring bow, laid-to admirably, riding as lightly and almost as dry as a seagull over the mountainous sea which rapidly got up under the influence of the gale.

I remained on deck long enough to thoroughly satisfy myself upon this point, and then, leaving the deck in charge of Hardy (who had the watch), with one man to tend the wheel, and two others on the look-out, I sent the remainder of the hands below to get a good meal with plenty of strong hot coffee ; while little Smellie and I sat down to our own almost equally humble spread in the small but cosy cabin.

The change from the cold wet sloppy deck, with its accompaniments of darkness, driving spray, and frequent rain-squalls, to the dry warm comfort of the cabin, lighted up with the brilliant rays of its single handsome swinging-lamp, its carpeted floor and well-cushioned lockers, was agreeable in the extreme ; and the sound of the gale, as it roared overhead and shrieked through the rigging, the patter and drip of the rain on the deck, and the occasional heavy "swish" of the drenching spray-showers, served but to increase the feeling of comfort which we enjoyed. We spent some time, after the table was cleared, in consulting the chart, interspersed with frequent references to the book of sailing directions, and when we tired of these a book apiece served to wile away the time until midnight, when Smellie had to turn out once more and take charge of the deck. As the eight strokes upon the bell proclaimed the expiration of the first watch, we donned our oil-skins and repaired to the deck in company.

The wind had been steadily increasing from the commencement of the gale, and was now blowing so heavily that every time the "Vigilant" rose upon the crest of a sea she careened almost gunwale-to, even with the scanty shred of canvas under which she

was hove-to. The sea, moreover, had increased with as great rapidity as the wind, and was now running tremendously high, breaking from time to time in a manner which made me somewhat uneasy. Still, the little craft was behaving beautifully and making excellent weather of it ; not a drop of anything heavier than spray having come on board her so far. The night was as dark as a wolf's mouth, there being no moon, and the sky remaining obscured by an impenetrable canopy of heavy black cloud-vapour which was darkest about the horizon, against which the phosphorescent wave-crests reared themselves portentously in startling relief. The intense darkness was my greatest source of anxiety, for we were directly in the track of outward-bound ships, and the wind was blowing from a quarter which, while not exactly fair, was sufficiently free to enable them to keep going, and that too at a speed which would send a ship of any size right over us almost without her crew knowing anything about it. We had, of course, our lights in their places, and brightly burning ; but we were so frequently hidden in the trough of the sea that a very bright look-out would be needed to discover us in time to avoid a collision, which was then, as it is now, the thing I most dread at sea—excepting fire. It seems needless to say that a bright look-out was kept on board the "Vigilant" that night ; a man on each cat-head, two in the waist—one on the weather and one on the lee side—and our two selves aft were kept constantly on the alert ; and with these precautions I was obliged to rest satisfied. As it happened, our elaborate precautions proved unnecessary, for not a single sail passed us during the night ; and at four o'clock next morning, when the watch was relieved, I went below and turned in, as the sky appeared to be lightening up a trifle, and I knew that it would be daylight in a short time.

When I went on deck again at seven bells (7.30. a.m), things looked pretty much as I had left them, excepting that the sea had continued to get up and was now running higher than I had ever seen it before. Our little craft was tossed about on its angry surface lightly as a withered leaf ; now rising up as though about to take flight into the midst of the rushing storm-wrack overhead, and anon plunging down the steep sides of the watery hills as though intent on reaching the very ocean's bed itself. It was very exciting, as well, it must be confessed, as somewhat trying to the nerves, to stand on the deck and watch the approach of the mountainous seas, rushing with threatening upreared crest upon the little craft, as though determined to engulf her. But, by watchful attention to the helm, her bows always met them at a safe angle, and

away they would sweep past us, harmless, but hissing and seething in impotent fury.

According to custom, Tom Hardy had charge of the deck while Smellie and I were below at breakfast. On our returning to the deck at the conclusion of the meal, he joined us to remark that he was under the impression he had once or twice heard the sound of firing to windward.

"Surely not," said little Smellie; "you must be mistaken, Mr. Hardy" (we always *Mistered* Tom, to his intense gratification, now that he had charge of a watch). "What ships could possibly fight in this weather?"

"Depends on the course they happen to be steering, sir," responded Tom. "It's poorish weather for a fight, I'll allow; but if one ship happens to be chasing t'other, and they'm both running before it, both bow and stern chasers might be worked, heavy as the sea is. Besides, it looks a deal worse to us, afloat here in this cock-boat, than 'twould if we was aboard the old "Juno," for instance; and a'ter all—hark! didn't you hear anything just then, gentlemen?"

The boom of a gun, muffled by the roar of the gale, but still heard with sufficient distinctness to render the sound unmistakable, at that moment broke upon the ear.

I pulled out my watch and noted the time. "Now listen for the next report!" I exclaimed; "perhaps it is a ship in distress."

But it was immediately evident that it could be nothing of that sort, for even as I spoke, another report came floating down upon the wings of the gale, and then two others in quick succession.

Tom Hardy sprang into the main rigging, and, going aloft as far as our short masts would permit, stood for nearly a minute, swaying about with the roll and pitch of the vessel, his eyes shaded by one hand, gazing eagerly to windward.

"Here they comes!" he hailed; "one a'ter t'other. Two frigates, seemin'ly; and one on 'em's a Frenchman all over—the chap that's leadin'; t'other's of course one of our ships."

"How are they steering?" I hailed.

"Straight for us as ever they can come, sir," replied Tom, as he nimbly descended the rigging again, and swung himself off the low rail to the deck.

Ten minutes afterwards the upper spars of the leading ship were in sight from the deck, when we rose upon the crest of a sea, and in another five minutes both craft were visible. The firing continued briskly on both sides, the rapidly-increasing distinctness of

the reports testifying to the speed with which the chase was hurrying along.

From the moment that the frigates became visible from the deck, our telescopes remained glued to our eyes, so to speak, and it was not long before we were able to distinguish that both were flying their colours, the leading ship showing the tricolour, and the other the white ensign.

"I say, Chester!" exclaimed little Smellie; "what a lark! Can't we have a flying shot at Johnnie as he goes past. Who knows? Perhaps we might knock away one of his spars and so help our own craft to get alongside. My eye! ain't they carrying on, too; topgallants'ls and stunsails on both sides. What a strain upon their spars and rigging! Cut away a brace or a backstay, now, aboard that Frenchman, and away would go a whole heap of his canvas. What a splendid craft she is! It is a true saying, if ever there was one, that 'The French know how to build ships, and the English how to sail them!' What do you say, Chester; shall we have a shot at him as he goes by?"

"And have his whole broadside poured into us by way of saying *thank'ee*," dryly remarked Hardy.

"I doubt whether he has his broadside guns cleared away, yet," I remarked; "and even if he has we are a very small target to fire at. I feel half inclined to take a shot at him if we get a good chance. At all events, you may clear away the long nine and load it; we can then be governed by circumstances."

No sooner said than done. The men set to work with all the glee of a parcel of school-boys intent upon some piece of mischief, and in a very short time the long nine-pounder mounted amidships was ready for service and loaded.

In the meantime pursuer and pursued continued their rapid flight down before the wind; both ships staggering along under a press of canvas which clearly indicated the alarm of the one and the determination of the other. As we stood watching them in breathless interest, the weather cleared somewhat; the dense canopy of cloud which had obscured the heavens for many hours broke up into rifts which permitted an occasional watery gleam of sunshine to penetrate through and light up the scene, glancing in streaks and patches here and there upon the mountain-surges, and changing their dull leaden hue into a dirty green, and shimmering for a moment upon the snowy canvas and bright copper of one or other of the frigates, only to fade away next instant and leave the picture, as it was before, a dull lifeless grey.

By the time that the French ship had approached to within a

mile of us, it became evident that if we both continued on our respective courses, without any alteration in our speeds, we should pass within perilous proximity of each other ; the "Vigilant's" foresheet was therefore let draw and the helm righted, so that we might forge ahead and cross the flying craft at a safe distance.

She was yawing about most frightfully, sheering first to port and then to starboard in a manner which seemed every moment to threaten that she would broach-to. Should such an accident occur in the then condition of the weather the total dismasting of the ship would be the least calamity which could reasonably be expected to follow ; while it was far more probable that she would either capsize or founder stern foremost. The steering of the English ship was in marked contrast to this, though she also sheered about to a certain extent ; still, it was so trifling in comparison with that of the Frenchman, that it appeared to us as though the Englishman was gaining upon the chase more by superior helmsmanship than by the possession of any advantage over him in point of actual speed.

As the French frigate continued to sweep down towards us I became exceedingly anxious ; for it now seemed as though we had delayed a trifle too long the act of falling away upon the "Vigilant," and that, at our low rate of speed, we should be unable to draw out of her immediate path. The ship, now distant not more than half a mile, came surging on, with her broad expanse of canvas fully distended by the following gale, and straining at the stout spars and tough hemp rigging as though it would tear the very masts themselves out of the hull and come flying down to leeward like cobwebs before a summer breeze ; or as though, when the ship rose upon the ridge of a sea, lifting her forefoot and some forty feet of her keel clear out of the water, she would take flight, and, leaving the sea altogether, soar away upon her canvas pinions like a startled sea-fowl. She was rolling heavily, so much so indeed that we more than once saw her dip her stunsail boom-ends alternately on the port and starboard sides into the water.

At length, as we rose to the crest of one mountainous sea, which had completely hidden the French ship from us, up to her very royal-mastheads, we saw her surging madly forward upon the breast of the one which followed it, the hissing foam-crest which pursued her rearing itself high and threateningly above her taffrail, while the ship herself, with her port gunwale deep buried in the water, was taking a desperate and uncontrollable sheer to starboard which we saw in a moment would hurl her crashing into the little "Vigilant" somewhere about the mainmast.

A cry, something between a yell and a shriek of horror and dismay, burst simultaneously from the lips of our crew as this awful danger burst upon us ; and, in a momentary panic, a general rush was made by all hands to that part of the vessel which appeared likely to receive the annihilating blow, with the intention of making a spring for life at the frigate's bowsprit and headgear. Even the helmsman was so infected by the sight that, abandoning the wheel, he too joined in the rush.

There was no time for remonstrance. Smellie and I were standing near the companion at the moment, watching the approach of the Frenchman ; and as the rush took place I seized him by the arm, and, shouting in his ear, "Cut the mizzen-sheet !" sprang to the wheel, and with frantic energy whirled it hard up. By the greatest good-luck the helmsman had already put the wheel a spoke or two over as the crest of the sea swept under us, so that we were actually paying off at the moment that I took the wheel. This fact, combined with the additional amount of helm which I gave her, and the lightning-like rapidity with which little Smellie whipped out his keen pocket-knife and drew it across the straining strands of the mizzen-sheet, saved the "Vigilant." The mizzen flogged itself to ribbons in a moment, while the foresail paid our bows broad off, and, filling powerfully at the same time, dragged us clear by the bare skin of our teeth. The frigate rushed foaming past our stern, so closely that the surge from her port bow dashed in over our taffrail, and the leach of her lower stunsail, catching the head of our mizzen-mast, buckled the spar until the port shrouds parted, when, luckily for us, *crack* went her stunsail-boom and her lower and fore-topmast stunsail began to thrash about so wildly, that they promised to give her crew their hands full to get in the sails without injury to any of the men.

Passing each other in such disagreeably close proximity, we had of course a perfect view of the French frigate, and a most superb craft she certainly was. A bran-new ship, to all appearance : she seemed to have been at sea scarcely long enough to wash the varnish off her teak and mahogany deck-fittings. The planks of her deck were almost snow-white, and some little taste and trouble appeared to have been expended in a succesful effort to impart a graceful effect to the decorations about the front of her spacious poop, beneath the over-hanging pent-house of which appeared her handsome steering-wheel, with four men hard—a great deal *too* hard, it seemed to me—at work at it. She showed eighteen ports of a side, all closed, and carried her due proportion of carronades on her forecastle and quarter-deck. Her masts, magnificent

sticks, and her short stout yards were bending like fishing-rods under the tremendous strain of her new canvas, which appeared as though it had not yet fully stretched into its proper shape; and every rope was coiled down in its proper place with the most scrupulous neatness. But, oh! the confusion and jabber and excitement of her crew. As she shaved past us, every man on deck jumped upon the hammock-rail and had his separate say to us—whether it were a word of caution, of congratulation at our escape from being run down, or of objurgation, it was quite impossible to tell; but, from the threatening character of their actions, I judged it to be the latter. There was only one calm individual among the whole, and he was the first lieutenant. He stood by the mizzen-rigging on the port side, clinging to a belaying-pin, and he vouchsafed us not so much as a passing glance, his whole attention being given to his spars and rigging, on which he kept his eyes anxiously fixed. The skipper, on the other hand, seemed to be more excited than any one else. When my eye lighted upon him he was grasping the poop-rail with his right hand and shaking his left fist at us. Just then our eyes met, when, to my surprise and disgust, he turned to a marine near him and pointed at me, at the same time apparently giving the man an order. The fellow raised his piece and fired, and the next instant I felt a violent blow accompanied by a sharp burning pain in my left arm, which dropped helplessly at my side, broken between the elbow and the shoulder.

All this passed in a single moment of time; the next instant we were vividly recalled to a sense of our own danger. As we rose upon the next wave our port quarter was exposed to its advancing crest, and there was only time to shout to all hands to “Hold on for your lives!” before it came hissing up, and, arching over us quite six feet above our low bulwarks, tumbled on board, a regular comber, filling us to the gunwale, bursting in the companion-doors, flooding the cabin, smashing one of our boats to atoms, and washing away everything that was not securely lashed. By something approaching a miracle, none of the men were swept overboard; and as soon as I had ascertained this by a hasty glance round the deck, directly I got my head above water, I gave the order for the forelug to be loosed and set. The men wanted no second bidding; they knew that if we got pooped a second time it would be all over with us; and in an incredibly short space of time we had the sail set, and were bowling away to leeward after the Frenchman.

Our position was now very much the reverse of an enviable one; as, being compelled for safety's sake to run dead before it, we were

exactly in the line of fire between the two ships, which continued to bang away at each other from time to time, quite regardless of the possible consequences to us; and their shot came hissing past us and over us so closely that it was manifestly imperative upon us to shift our berth without loss of time. Giving orders, therefore, that the spare mizzen should be bent and set, and the craft brought to once more—but on the starboard tack this time, so as to afford us an opportunity to knot the shrouds on the larboard side, carried away by the French frigate—I left little Smellie and Tom Hardy on deck to see to its execution; and, summoning the assistant-surgeon to my aid, retired below to have my wounded arm coopered up.

My friend Sawbones had just arrived at that stage of his operations which required him to torture me almost beyond my powers of endurance by grinding the two broken bone-ends together to get them in proper position, when we felt a violent concussion, accompanied by a loud explosion on deck, speedily followed by vociferous cheering; and the next moment down trundled that young scamp Smellie, his face beaming all over with a broad grin, as he exclaimed,—

"Hurrah, Chester, I've done it! Did it *myself*, Hardy will tell you so."

"Did *what*, for goodness' sake?" groaned I, as the medico, under the influence of a terrific roll, gave my arm a most awful wrench. "What did you fire for?"

"Fired at the Frenchman, of course," replied he, somewhat disconcerted. "I understood that you agreed we should have a shot at him, so we gave him one from long Tom. I pointed the gun myself; and—only fancy!—knocked away his mizzen-topmast, which brought down his main-topgallantmast with it; and there he is now in a pretty mess. My eye! *that* was a close one," he added, as a twelve-pound shot sung close over our heads, without hitting anything however.

"It sounds remarkably as though he were anxious to return the compliment, if he can," said I. "You had better go on deck again and hurry the men up with that mizzen; and round to as soon as you possibly can. If one of those shot happen to plump on board us we shall probably have cause to remember the circumstance."

The lad darted up the companion-way again, three stairs at a time; and very shortly afterwards I heard him shout down to me,—

"I say, Chester, the mizzen is bent and all ready for setting; shall we hoist away?"

“ Watch for a good opportunity,” I shouted back, “ and as soon as it comes, down with your helm, and sway up the sail at the same time.”

“ Ay, ay ; we will do so,” was the response.

A few minutes elapsed ; and then I felt the little craft rising up, up, up, until it seemed as though she were about to turn a summer-sault with us ; there was a *thud* at her stern, and a heavy *swish* of water on her deck as the crest of the sea struck her and broke over the taffrail, and then Tom Hardy’s voice exclaimed,—

“ Now—*now’s* your time, sir ! Jam your helm hard-a-port, you Dick ! hard over with it, man ; that’s your sort. Now, sway away upon these here mizzen halliards ; down with your fore-lug ; ease up the fore sheet there, for’ard ; up with the mizzen, lads ; bowse it *well* up ; that’s well ; belay. Haul your fore-sheet over to wind’ard, and make fast. There ! that’s capital. Now let’s see what we can do to these here shrouds.”

From all of which, and the altered character of the little craft’s motion, I learned that the ticklish manœuvre of rounding-to had been safely executed.

A quarter of an hour afterwards the medico finished me off, and I was able, with Hardy’s assistance, to go on deck again and take a look round before turning into my hammock to nurse my wounded arm.

We were now hove-to upon the starboard tack, with our head to the southward ; the English frigate had passed us, and was by this time some two miles to leeward, on our port quarter, the Frenchman still leading, though he had lost ground considerably, and he seemed yet to be in the thick of his trouble with the wreck of his spars. The bow and stern-chasers of the two ships were still playing merrily away, but without any very marked result, as far as we could see ; and shortly afterwards we lost sight of both ships in the thick weather to leeward, and saw no more of them.

We were not long in getting our larboard mizzen shrouds knotted and set up afresh ; and as soon as this was done we watched our chance and wore round once more, with our head to the northward—I remaining on deck to watch the operation—after which I was glad to get into my hammock and seek relief to my wounded fin.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE FRENCH FRIGATE.



HE gale lasted through the night and all next day, moderating about sun-down, however, sufficiently to allow of our setting our fore and main-lugs close-reefed, and keeping away upon our course. The wind continued to drop after that all through the night, the sea also going down rapidly; and next day we were able to shift our canvas, setting the lateens in place of the lugs; after which we bowled gaily along without further adventure, passing Ushant on the evening of the fourth day after the gale had blown itself out, and arriving at Spithead somewhat within the next forty-eight hours.

The anchor let go, Smellie and I jumped into the gig, and, taking the despatch-box with us, pulled ashore, landing at the Sally-port. From thence we proceeded, first to the admiral's office, and afterwards to the "George" in High Street, where I ordered a post-chaise; and then the pair of us sat down to a hastily-prepared dinner while the carriage was in process of fitting-out.

In consequence of my representations to the admiral, he had ordered the "Vigilant" into harbour immediately, to refit and make good the slight damage inflicted on us during the gale in the Bay of Biscay, and, when the post-chaise was announced, Smellie only remained long enough to see me fairly under way, when he returned on board to take the little hooker into harbour, and superintend the operation of refitting.

It was not quite six p.m. when we shoved off from before the door of the "George," and dashed away up the High Street, and soon afterwards the chaise was bowling along at a spanking pace over the dry, white, dusty road in the open country—the landscape flooded in the lovely golden haze of a fine summer evening, and the air heavy with the perfume of flowers and the sweet, health-giving smell of rich pasture-lands, long chestnut-avenues, and thick pine-plantations. The mingled odours of the country—so different from

the strong smell of the sea-breeze—the sight of the slanting sunbeams glancing through the boles and branches of the venerable trees dotted here and there in clumps along the road-side ; of the verdant hedges with their rich clusters of delicate dog-roses and trailing honeysuckle or wild convolvulus ; of the groups of sleek cattle feeding in the fields, contemplatively chewing the cud under the shade of some overhanging tree, or browsing along the road-side ; of the knots of rosy, sun-tanned children playing about the village-roads or on the green, and turning to stand open-mouthed and stare at the chaise as we dashed past ; of the pretty cottages nestling in a bower of greenery, each with its tiny flower-garden in front, and a thin wreath of blue smoke curling up from its chimney into the still evening air ; of the picturesque villages, with their ancient church-spires pointing heavenward ; and of the stately country-seats of the gentry, surrounded by noble trees, the growth of centuries, the deer clustered beneath their umbrageous branches, with their spacious flower-terraces and long avenues of limes, arching chestnuts, or venerable oaks, reaching from the house to the distant road, and terminating in snug little ivy-covered lodges and heavy ornamental iron gates with massive stone piers, moss-grown, and surmounted by time-worn and weather-stained stone sculptures of the arms of the family ; the drowsy chime of the church-clocks ; the barking of dogs ; the lowing of cattle ; the voices of herdsmen or field-labourers singing as they wended their weary way homeward after the labour and heat of the day—the sound softened and mellowed by distance ; all combined to render that journey one of the most pleasant and enjoyable I had ever undertaken, notwithstanding the pain and discomfort which I experienced from my wounded arm.

The evening passed on ; the lovely, silent twilight insensibly deepened into night ; the stars twinkled forth, one by one, in the pure, clear, deepening blue overhead ; the road gradually widened ; the houses along its sides became more and more frequent, the atmosphere thickened ; the horizon ahead grew luminous ; lights appeared and rapidly increased in number, soon they were glancing on both sides of us ; a dull, heavy roar became audible, and finally, as the church-clocks were striking the hour of midnight, the chaise pulled up before the door of my uncle's house in St. James's Square ; and I had arrived in town.

As the post-boy let down the steps and threw open the carriage-door for me to alight, I could see through the fanlight over the door that there was a light in the hall, so I felt pretty certain that my uncle had not yet retired. I ran up the steps and gave the

bell-handle a tug which speedily brought old Timothy to the door.

"Has Sir Peregrine retired yet, Tim?" said I.

"He has not, sir," replied the ancient, "but I much doubt if he will see any one at such a late—Why, I declare, if it ain't Master Ralph! Come in, sir; come in. Sir Peregrine is in the libr'y. Won't he be glad to see you, just! He's always looking through the paper to see if there's any news of the 'Juno,' or if your name is mentioned, sir. This is an unexpected visit, though, Master Ralph; I hope there's nothing wrong, sir."

"Oh dear, no! quite the reverse I hope, Tim, my boy. I've been sent home with despatches. Now, lead the way to the library, if you please."

This short confabulation passed in the hall while Tim was relieving me of my cloak and hat. He now preceded me to the library, at the door of which he knocked, and then, flinging open the portal, he announced me.

"Master Ralph, Sir Peregrine."

I passed into the lofty apartment, its walls lined from floor to ceiling with well-stocked book-shelves, and found the worthy knight seated in his own particular old easy-chair, with one foot—ominously swathed in flannel—reposing upon another; his specs on his nose, and the gazette in his hand.

He looked round with a start as my name was mentioned, shaded his eyes with his hand for an instant, as his eyes fell upon my advancing figure, and then—forgetting all about his gout—started to his feet with both hands outstretched.

"Why, Ralph! My dear boy, where—*confound* this gout! it *always* attacks me at exactly the wrong moment—but never mind; what cloud have you dropped from?"

"From no cloud at all, my dear sir, but just from an ordinary post-chaise, in which I have come up from Portsmouth. How are you, sir? I hope you have nothing worse than the gout to complain of. Wish you were free of *that*, for it must be very troublesome."

"Troublesome enough, my boy, you may take my word for that; but the present attack is luckily very trifling—a mere flea-bite, in fact. And how are you? You don't look particularly bright, rather the reverse, indeed; and what is the matter with your arm?"

Thereupon I gave him a hasty outline of my story, so far at least as the cruise in the "Vigilant" was concerned; and then old Richards, the butler, brought in the supper; serving it, by Sir Peregrine's orders, in the library, so that we might not be dis-

turbed or my yarn interrupted by passing from one room to another.

We sat until close upon three o'clock a.m., my uncle forgetting all about bed in his anxiety to hear full particulars of my doings since I had last parted from him. At length, however, he glanced at the clock upon the mantelpiece, and at once pulled me up short.

"There, there! that will do for to-night, my dear boy. I've forgotten everything in listening to you, and have allowed you to talk all this time instead of sending you straight off to your bunk, as I ought to have done, and you with a broken arm, too. But I am delighted to have heard all that you have told me—the gazette tells one nothing—and I can afford you the satisfaction of knowing that your name has attracted attention in the right quarter; Sir James has spoken to me about you on more than one occasion; and your promotion is certain. If you go on as you have begun, Ralph, I predict that you will mount the ratlines rapidly. Now, we will breakfast at ten o'clock, if that will suit you, and then I will go with you myself to the Admiralty with the despatches. My gout? Pooh! I'll lay a crown it will be gone by the time I turn out in the morning; and if it is not, it is not bad enough to keep me at anchor here when I can perhaps do you a good turn. I'll introduce you to Sir James; I should like him to see for himself the sort of lad you are. Now good-night! Tim will attend to you. God bless you, my boy."

I trundled off, Timothy leading the way with a light in each hand to the room which I had formerly occupied, and, having undressed with the assistance of my somewhat garrulous attendant, tumbled into the luxurious bed, and immediately fell into a sound sleep.

The arrangement of the previous night was duly carried out, Sir Peregrine's gout having, as he had predicted, been merciful enough to afford him a respite.

We drove to the Admiralty, and I sent in my despatch-box. My uncle also sent in his card.

Half an hour elapsed, Sir James happening to be engaged when we arrived, and then Sir Peregrine was admitted to the august presence. Another half-hour passed, at the expiration of which time I also was invited into the sanctum. My uncle introduced me; Sir James uttered a few complimentary phrases upon my past conduct, informed me that "he had his eye upon me," presented two fingers for me to shake, gave his entire hand to my uncle, and we were dismissed. As we passed through the outer office it was intimated to me that my presence would be required there at noon next day.

“That’s a good job well over,” ejaculated my uncle, as we once more seated ourselves in the carriage and drove off. “You are in high favour, let me tell you, my boy,” he continued. “Lord Hood has referred to you in very flattering terms in his despatches, in connexion with that hare-brained escapade of yours at Bastia; and Sir James has assured me of the very great satisfaction with which he views your conduct, and has promised moreover that he will take the earliest possible opportunity to show his appreciation of it. Now, where shall we go? I suppose you do not feel very much in cue for sight-seeing, with your wounded arm, eh? Very well; then we’ll drive to my tailor’s—you want a new gang of rigging put over your mast-head badly, my boy, and then we’ll go home and you shall rest a bit. I have a few friends coming to dinner this evening; but you need not join us if you do not feel equal to it, you know.”

The “new gang of rigging” was duly ordered, and faithfully promised for next day at noon—Sir Peregrine insisting upon its being charged to his account—and then we returned to St. James’s Square.

With the dinner-hour my uncle’s guests arrived, some twenty in number; and, as I rather fancied the dear old gentleman would be glad if I were present, I put in an appearance. My suspicions were no doubt well founded, as it turned out that one of the guests was no less a personage than my new acquaintance of the morning—the great Sir James himself. The old boy was a good deal less taut in the backstays than he had been in the morning, giving me his whole hand to shake on this occasion. During dinner he addressed himself to me several times, putting questions to me with reference to our recent operations in Corsica—that happening to be one of the topics of conversation; and after the meal was over he invited me to haul alongside, and chatted with me quite half an hour upon the same subject. Later on in the evening I happened to overhear him remark to my uncle,—

“Like your nephew, Portfire—am much pleased with him—promising young officer—very—smart and intelligent—seems steady too—shall keep my eye on him.”

Which, of course, was very gratifying.

I drove to the office next day at noon, Sir Peregrine accompanying me, but this time he remained in his carriage while I went inside. My despatch-box was handed back to me, together with written orders—which were read over to me—to proceed without delay to Malta, there to hand over the contents of the said box to Lord Hood. In the event of his lordship not being there, I was to search for and find him.

“Well, Ralph, what news?” asked my uncle, as I rejoined him.

“I must leave you at once, dear sir,” I replied. “I have orders to sail forthwith for Malta, with these despatches. I had hoped they would have given me time to run down home, if only for a few hours; but all that is quite knocked on the head. As it is, I shall not be able to enjoy above another hour of your society, uncle, for I must start for Portsmouth without a moment’s delay.”

“Ah!” remarked Sir Peregrine, “I anticipated this, from a remark which Sir James let fall last night, and I have so far provided for it that we can start in an hour’s time. I feel so much better that I shall run down with you. We will post down in my own carriage, and after I have seen you fairly off, I will look in upon your father and spend a day or two with them on my way back to town. I shall then be able to tell them all about you.”

I tried to dissuade the old gentleman from undertaking so fatiguing a journey, but, having once made up his mind, there was no moving him from his purpose; and accordingly, having partaken of a good substantial luncheon, we started away about two p.m., and, after a pleasant, uneventful journey, reached Portsmouth a few minutes before eight o’clock in the evening.

We put up at the “George;” and, after ordering dinner, walked down to the harbour, and soon made out the “Vigilant,” anchored about a quarter of a mile away. The tide was still flowing a little; so, jumping into a wherry, we were soon alongside.

I found Smellie on board, and all hands, including a strong gang of dockyard workmen, still busy, late as it was, putting the finishing touches to the repairs. The provisions, water, and other stores had been shipped during the day; but the boat, to replace the one destroyed, would not be ready until the next morning.

My uncle had been trotting round, giving the little craft a thorough inspection, during the time I had been engaged with my junior, and expressed himself as being much pleased with her handsome model. When we were ready to return to the shore he proposed that we should take little Smellie with us; and we accordingly all three trundled over the side into the shore-boat, which we had detained—leaving Hardy to superintend the finishing touches—and rowed down the harbour again in the light of a beautiful, clear full moon.

Sir Peregrine was in high spirits that evening at dinner; he said it reminded him of his young days to be down there once more, and he completely unbent from his usual stateliness, so that we spent a most delightful evening, turning in about midnight.

I awoke early next morning, and, having roused out my second

in command, we walked down to the dockyard to hurry the people up with the new boat, which they were just finishing off.

We returned to the hotel to breakfast at eight o'clock ; and by ten a.m., having completed all my business on shore, we once more chartered a wherry, and went on board, my uncle accompanying us. On reaching the "Vigilant" I found that the new boat had been delivered and was hoisted in, the dockyard gang was clear of the ship, and everything was ready for an immediate start. I accordingly gave the word to unmoor, and in another quarter of an hour we passed out of the harbour with a nice little breeze from about N.N.E.

My uncle remained on board until we were abreast of Cowes, when he ordered the wherry—which had been towing astern—to be hauled alongside. The "Vigilant" was hove-to; my uncle shook hands with little Smellie, slipped a five-pound note into the hand of Chips, the carpenter's mate, for the crew to drink my health, and then, taking a hasty but most affectionate leave of me, hurried over the side into the wherry, seized the yoke-lines, and bade the boatman make sail for Portsmouth Harbour. We at once filled away again ; and two hours afterwards passed through the Needles.

Nothing worthy of note occurred until we were half-way across the Bay of Biscay, when, about four bells in the forenoon watch of a most delightful day, with a moderate breeze from the westward, and a very long swell, but no sea, the look-out man aloft reported a sail broad on our lee bow.

I was in the cabin at the time, reading.

"What does she look like?" inquired Smellie, who had the watch.

"I can only see the heads of her fore and main topgallantsails," replied the man, "but I believe she is a frigate, sir."

Smellie came to the open skylight and spoke down through it:—

"I say, Chester, if it's not troubling you too much, will you hand me up my glass, please? It is in the beackets, just inside the door of my berth. Here's a strange sail to leeward, and I want to take a squint at her."

I found the telescope, and carried it on deck myself. Master Harold slung it over his shoulder, and in another minute was perched on the long tapering yard of the lateen mainsail.

"What do *you* make her out to be?" I hailed him, after he had given her a careful overhauling for some three or four minutes.

"A frigate, without doubt," he replied, his glass still levelled at her. "I can see her mizzen-royalmast, with the yard across. Her

sails are not large enough for a line-of-battle ship. Ha ! she has hove in stays. Round she comes, smartly too. Why, she is setting her royals ! Surely she can't be coming after us ?

"As like as not," returned I. "If we can see her, she can see us ; and as a craft of our rig is a rather unusual sight just about here, it is not improbable that her skipper may wish to learn a little more about us. What is she—English or French, think you ?"

"I believe she is French," was the reply. "I had a good look at her canvas as she hove about, and it appeared to me to be decidedly Frenchified in shape."

We were already hugging the wind as closely as was possible, and had every possible inch of canvas spread ; so we could do nothing but stand on as we were going, and await the course of events.

Her sails rose rapidly above the horizon for the first hour or so, but after that, as we brought her more on our quarter, they began to sink again. When about abeam of us, the stranger hoisted the tricolour at her gaff-end, fired a gun, and showed a signal from her main-royal mast-head, of which we could make nothing. We, however, hoisted the French flag also, and left them to make the best they could of it. After the first signal had been flying some time, it was hauled down, and another substituted, but with no better luck than before, and it was soon hauled down.

"She is after us, for a guinea," said I.

"Ay, ay, nae doot o' that," quoth the old quarter-master ; "but she'll no catch us the gait she's ganging the noo. This is oor ain weather, and I wad like brawly to see the *freigate* that can beat us wi' nae mair wind than this. Yon Frenchman wad gie a hantle o' siller to see the breeze freshen, but it'll no do that yet awhile."

The frigate stood on until she was well upon our weather quarter, by which time the heads of her topgallantsails were just visible from the deck, when, to remove any doubt that might have remained as to her intentions, she once more hove in stays and stood after us.

I went below and looked anxiously at the barometer ; it was perfectly steady. I then returned to the deck and keenly scrutinized the sky ; it was covered with patches of thin fleecy cloud which allowed the sun to show through, with broad patches of clear blue sky between ; and the breeze was just fresh enough to curl the tops of the wavelets over in tiny flecks of foam, and to heel the "Vigilant" until our lee covering-board was just awash, with the clear, sparkling water occasionally welling up through the lee scuppers. It was, indeed, as old Sandy had remarked, the weather in which the little "Vigilant" stepped out to the greatest advantage,

and I had very little fear of any square-rigged vessel being able to overhaul us so long as matters remained *in statu quo*. I knew that we were sailing a good couple of points nearer the wind than was the Frenchman astern, and I believed we were going through the water nearly if not quite as fast as he was. By two bells in the afternoon-watch the craft had dropped to leeward until she was a couple of points on our lee quarter, but she had certainly risen us a little, for by standing on the weather rail I could see the heads of her topsails.

Matters remained in pretty much the same state for the rest of the day, excepting that our pursuer gradually tagged away farther and farther to leeward, until he was broad upon our lee quarter. Toward sun-down, however, the breeze began to freshen, and our pertinacious companion soon showed us how great an advantage this was to him, by the way in which he drew up on our lee beam.

When I went below to tea, I found that the barometer had fallen a little, and by the time that I had finished the meal and regained the deck, we were jerking through a short, choppy head sea, with our lee bulwarks half-buried in the foam which hissed past our sides, the fore-deck drenched with the continuous heavy shower of spray which flew in over our weather bow, and our long yards swaying and bending as though each had been a fishing-rod with a lively salmon at the end of the line. I began to feel rather anxious, for the sea which the freshening breeze had knocked up was very detrimental to *our* speed, while upon the frigate, owing to her vastly superior power, it had little or no effect.

Night at length fell. There was no moon, and the stars were partially obscured by the patches of cloud which covered the sky. I began to hope we were going to have a dark night, under cover of which we might give our pursuer the slip. As the darkness closed down upon us, and just before she vanished in the gloom, I took her bearings with the greatest accuracy. She had by this time crept up to within a couple of points abaft our lee beam, and from our deck the upper halves of her topsails were visible. I allowed half an hour to elapse, and then tried to find her with my night-glass. To my great disappointment, I did so without much difficulty ; and, what was worse, she was fast drawing up abreast of us.

It was by this time as dark as it was likely to be, so I resolved to heave about at once, in hope that we might execute the manœuvre undetected, and so give the Frenchman the slip. We accordingly tacked ; and as soon as we were fairly round, and the sheets, &c., coiled down, I had another look for her. Presently the

small dark patch swam into view, as I carefully swept the horizon at the point where I knew her to be, and, to my disappointment, it showed much shorter than before. She also had tacked.

"Umph!" I muttered, "their night-glasses are as good as my own, apparently."

I began to see a French prison looming in the distance; for, from the rapidity with which she had tacked, and the manner in which, notwithstanding our superior weatherliness, she was overhauling us, I knew that our pursuer must be an exceedingly smart ship, and her skipper was acting like a man who had all his wits about him.

All our lights were of course most carefully masked—a tarpaulin being thrown over the cabin skylight, and a seaman's jacket over the binnacle, the helmsman steering by a star.

We stood on thus for about a couple of hours after tacking, and I was seriously debating in my mind the possibility of giving the Frenchman the slip by lowering away all our canvas and then running to leeward under bare poles, my eyes resting abstractedly upon a brilliant planet broad upon our weather bow, which was just on the point of dipping below the horizon, when suddenly the said planet vanished. I took no notice of this until it as suddenly reappeared in the space of a few seconds.

"Another sail, by all that's complicating!" I ejaculated.

"Another sail! Where away, sir?" exclaimed Hardy, who was standing between me and the helmsman.

"Just to the southward of that bright planet on the horizon, broad on our larboard bow," said I, as I levelled my glass. "Ah! there she is. Another frigate, by the look of her—hull up, too."

"Phew!" whistled Hardy; "that's rather awk'ard; she may pick us out any minute. But perhaps she's English, sir. You don't often see two French ships so close together as this here. Can you see her pretty plain, sir?"

"Not very," I replied. But I fancy there's an English look about her."

"Let *me* take a squint at her, sir."

I handed him over the glass, and he took a good long look at her. Suddenly he handed the glass back to me.

"She's English, sir! I'll take my oath of it!" he exclaimed. "She's the 'Amethyst,' that's what she is. I knows her by the way her fore-topmast and topgallantmast is looking over her bows. There ain't another ship afloat as has got such a kink in her foremast as the 'Amethyst,' and that's her, sir, as sure as I'm Tom Hardy."

"Are you *quite* certain?" I inquired. "Do not speak rashly, because the consequences may prove serious to us. If you are *positive* about the matter, I will signal him and turn the tables upon our friend astern."

"Let me take another look, sir."

I handed over the glass, and he took another long look at her.

"Fire away with your lanterns, sir, as soon as you like," said he. "I'll stake my liberty that yon craft is none other than the 'Amethyst.' She's a twenty-eight; but her skipper is man enough to give a good account of Johnny, I'll be bound."

"Then rouse out the lanterns, and let's make the private signal," said I. "But instead of hoisting them at our peak, where the Frenchman will see them and perhaps suspect something, haul the staysail down, get a block well up on the fore-stay, and we will run them up there; our sails will then hide them from the craft astern."

So said, so done; we showed the private signal, and in less than a minute it was properly answered, upon which we telegraphed the news that a French frigate was about ten miles astern in chase of us.

Our signal was duly acknowledged; and immediately afterwards the "Amethyst"—for she it was—bore up.

I now looked for the French frigate, to see if I could observe anything to show that they had seen the English frigate's signal-lanterns; but she was still carrying on upon the same tack, and, as I judged that she and the "Amethyst" were about seventeen miles apart, I hoped that the lights had escaped her notice.

In about twenty minutes the "Amethyst" passed us, a mile to windward, and apparently steering a course which would run her slap on board the Frenchman in another half-hour. There was not a light to be seen anywhere about her; but for all that I knew that her crew were wide awake and busy. She was running down under courses, topsails, spanker, and jib, her topgallant yards down upon the caps, with the sails clewed up, but not furled; royals stowed.

"Now we shall see some fun shortly," exclaimed Smellie, in high glee—he having got an inkling that something out of the common was toward, in that mysterious way in which people *do* learn such things on board a small ship, and had accordingly come on deck. But he was mistaken for once, if by the term *fun* he meant a frigate-action; for old Clewline, the skipper of the "Amethyst," was too seasoned a hand to do anything rashly. He ran down, his ship as dark as the grave, until he had attained a position about two miles dead to windward of our pursuer, when he hauled up and showed

the private signal at his gaff-end. The French frigate immediately edged away about four points and showed some lanterns, but they were not a reply to the "Amethyst's" signal; so Clewline tried another—to make quite sure of avoiding any mistake. This was not answered at all; on the contrary, the Frenchman hauled down his lanterns and wore short round, crowding sail at the same moment; whereupon the "Amethyst" also bore up again and—Clewline must have had his men aloft all the time, ready for the emergency—as she squared away in chase, we saw her stunsails fluttering out to their boom-ends on both sides. We then tacked and resumed our original course once more, heartily thankful for our escape, and chuckling mightily at the thought of the trap Johnny Crapaud had run his nose into. In less than half an hour afterwards we lost sight of both ships.

We reached Gibraltar without further incident, and failing there to obtain any intelligence as to Lord Hood's whereabouts, we filled up our water and sailed again for Malta the same evening. We had a splendid but perfectly uneventful run from the Rock, a westerly wind and fine weather prevailing during the whole trip.

On our arrival at Malta I learned that the "Victory" was lying at Genoa, and thither we accordingly went, picking up on the way a small French schooner from the Levant, laden with fruit. We were over three weeks on the passage, having an alternation of calms and strong head-winds to contend with; so that I was heartily glad when we at length found ourselves in port, and the *mud-hook* down.

The "Juno" was also there, and, on delivering my despatches and making my report, I was ordered to give up the command of the "Vigilant" to the senior mid belonging to the "Victory," and to rejoin my own ship. This, of course, I at once did; and I was not at all sorry to get back once more among my old shipmates, from whom I had been separated for so long a time.

I had not left the "Victory" many minutes before the signal was made for our skipper to repair on board the flag-ship. His boat was still alongside that craft when I went up over the "Juno's" side with my trifling belongings; but by the time that I had stowed them away and had found my way on deck, Captain Hood was back again on board his own ship, and in conference with the first lieutenant in the former's cabin. It was not long before the first luff reappeared—with such a delighted expression upon his face that we at once felt certain he had heard pleasant news, and very soon it came out that I had brought, among my despatches, the order for the "Juno" to return home and pay off.

“ Hurrah for old England ! ” was now the cry ; everybody was in the highest of spirits, for there was literally nothing to do but up anchor and away, which was promptly done, so that I scarcely spent half a dozen hours in the port of Genoa, the “ Juno ” sailing on the evening of the day on which the “ Vigilant ” had arrived.

We were nearly a month in reaching as far as Gibraltar ; but after getting fairly through the Gut and round St. Vincent we made short miles of it, the girls having taken hold of the tow-rope, as Jack says, and eventually arrived at Spithead without the occurrence of any circumstance worth recording. The ship was paid off next day, and I was enabled to return once more, after an absence of nearly two years, to the paternal roof.

CHAPTER XXIV.

WESTWARD HO !

I FOUND all hands at home in the best of health, and received of course a hearty welcome from them. My father appeared to be exactly as I had left him, not a day older ; but my mother had gathered an extra wrinkle or two about the corners of her eyes, I thought, and the grey hairs were mustering pretty strongly. Poor soul ! all the stress and strain fell upon her ; it was she who had all the planning, the cutting, and contriving to make both ends meet ; and it was no wonder if she showed here and there a scar received in the tough battle. The girls showed the greatest alteration, and, I may add, improvement of appearance, for they had developed from pretty girls into most lovely women—at least I thought so.

I had been home a fortnight when my uncle, Sir Peregrine Port-fire, to whom I had written shortly after my arrival, came down, and took up his quarters with us. Life under the old roof-tree was very quiet and uneventful, and nothing worthy of note occurred for the first six weeks of my stay. I was taking matters quietly for a while, as I thought I was justified in doing, when, about the end of the time I have named, a chaise drove up to the door one evening, about half an hour before the appearance of dinner upon the table, and out jumped Mr. Annesley. I was delighted to see him, and forthwith introduced him to my father and Sir Peregrine, both of whom gave him a most cordial welcome. My mother and the girls were dressing for dinner at the time.

On dinner being announced, our newly-arrived and self-invited guest took my sister Florrie in tow, and, having convoyed her safely to a chair, brought himself to an anchor alongside her, playing the agreeable so effectively that he quite absorbed Miss Florrie's attention during the meal. On the departure of the ladies, the object of his visit came out. He had, in just recognition of his services, been appointed to the command of a new frigate, named

the "Astarte," which was then fitting out at Portsmouth for the West India station ; and he had hunted me up to see if I would go with him. I at once frankly told him there was nothing I should like better ; and, as my uncle also approved of the proposal, the question was settled then and there.

I learned, with a great deal of pleasure, that he had secured as his first lieutenant, Mr. Flinn, our quondam "second" on board the "Juno." Bob Summers and little Smellie were also going to be with us once more, so that we promised to be quite a family party. Mr. Flinn, it appeared, had already joined, as well as the second lieutenant, Summers, Smellie, and another midshipman ; the former, assisted by Smellie and the new mid, being engaged in superintending the fitting-out of the ship, while the second lieutenant and Master Bob were getting together a crew. The two latter were taking their time about this business—Captain Annesley being very anxious to have a thorough picked crew—but they had succeeded in securing some five and twenty of the primest seamen lately paid off from the "Juno," as well as about forty other good men. My new skipper was kind enough to say that I need be in no hurry to join, as he would write and let me know when my services were required.

These matters settled, we joined the ladies, and, as it seemed to me, the skipper was again very attentive to Florrie, turning over the pages of her music, joining her in a duet or two, and reeling off small-talk by the fathom between whiles.

Next morning, after an early breakfast, we—that is, Captain Annesley, my uncle, and I—started for Portsmouth ; the former to remain there and watch the progress of work on board the "Astarte," my uncle and I to just take a look at the new craft and get back home again in time for dinner.

A smart drive of an hour and a half landed us at the "George" in Portsmouth, and we forthwith proceeded to the dockyard and on board. The craft was still alongside the sheers, but her lower masts were in and rigged, the tops over the mast-heads, and the three topmasts all ready for going aloft. She proved to be an 18-pounder 38-gun frigate, with a flush upper-deck fore and aft, which presented a beautifully spacious appearance to us who had been accustomed to the cramped look of the "Juno's" upper-deck, cut into by the poop and topgallant-forecastle. Her hull was very long, and rather lower in proportion than that of the "Juno ;" and her lines were as fine as it had been possible to make them. The joiners were still busily at work upon the captain's cabin and the gun-room, and everything was in a state of indescribable litter and

confusion, but I saw enough to satisfy me that my new ship was as fine a craft of her class as ever slid off the stocks, and I looked forward to a happy and stirring life on board her. Having taken a good look round her in every part, shaken hands with little Smellie, and made the acquaintance of the new mid, a little shrimp of a fellow named Fisher, my uncle and I started for home again.

On the day but one following, Sir Peregrine and I trundled up to town to see about my outfit, as there were several things I should require on the West India station that had not been necessary in the Mediterranean. On our return we found the skipper comfortably domiciled in his former quarters. Things, he said, were going on so satisfactorily at Portsmouth that he had felt no hesitation about leaving everything to Mr. Flinn and accepting an invitation—which my father had pressed upon him on the occasion of his first visit—to spend Christmas at the rectory, and to indulge in the unwonted luxury of a thorough rest.

My father was always busy with his parish-work, and Sir Peregrine's gout precluded the possibility of his taking much outdoor exercise, so the duty of entertaining our guest devolved almost wholly upon the girls and myself. And I must say that our efforts in that direction appeared to be crowned with signal success. We had a spin after the hounds once or twice, and did a little shooting, but my superior officer appeared to enjoy the skating-parties most, when the frost would allow us to indulge in this pastime, and I could not help noticing how regularly we seemed to separate into two parties; the skipper invariably pairing off with Florrie, and leaving Amy to my care and pilotage.

At length a letter came from Mr. Flinn to say that the ship was all at aunto, and would in another eight-and-forty hours be quite ready for sea. It arrived while we were at breakfast; and as he announced its contents and intimated that we must both be off forthwith, I saw my sister Florence go pale to the lips for a moment, and then flush up as though the blood would burst through her delicate skin. The news threw a complete damper upon the previously merry party, and the meal was finished in almost perfect silence. At length my father returned thanks and rose to retire to his study. As he did so Captain Annesley also rose and said something to him in a low tone, which seemed to me to be a request for a few moments' private conversation. My father bowed, and led the way to the library, with the skipper following close in his wake.

They were closeted together nearly an hour, and when the man-o'-war rejoined us, the first thing he did was to carry Florrie off to the conservatory. My mother was, as usual, at that hour, busy in

her own snugery with the cook, so that Amy and I found ourselves left alone in the drawing-room, Sir Peregrine having retired to the terrace for his morning smoke. I began by this time to see pretty clearly what was in the wind ; so when Amy proposed that I should accompany her as far as old Mrs. Jones' cottage, I assented with effusion. We returned just in time to sit down to luncheon ; and when we took our places at table, Florrie's look of mingled joy and sadness, the sparkling diamond upon her engaged finger, and the elated look upon my skipper's handsome face told me all that I had before only shrewdly suspected.

Immediately after luncheon, the carriage was brought round, our traps tumbled on board, and the skipper and I started for Portsmouth, after a most affecting leave-taking all round. Poor Florrie bore up bravely until the very last moment, when, as Annesley took her hand and bent over her to say good-bye, her fortitude completely deserted her, and, flinging herself into his arms, she sobbed as if her heart would break. I felt a lump rise in my own throat as I sat an unwilling witness to her distress ; while as for Annesley—but avast ! we are bound on a quest for honour and glory, so stow away the tear-bottles, coil down all tender feeling out of sight, and Westward Ho ! for the land of Yellow Jack.

On the day but one following, we sailed from Spithead in half a gale of wind from E.N.E., with frequent snow-squalls ; pretty much the same weather in fact as we had on the eventful occasion of my sailing in the "Scourge." We looked into Plymouth Sound on our way, assumed the convoy of a fleet of some seventeen sail, and proceeded.

Oh ! the misery of convoy-duty. To feel that you have a smart ship underfoot and a crew who will shrink from nothing their skipper may put them alongside, and to be doomed to drag along, day after day, under close-reefed topsails, in order to avoid running away from the sluggish, deep-laden merchantmen ; with signalling and gun-firing going on day and night, restraining the swift and urging on the slow ; with an occasional cruise round the entire fleet to keep them well together, and an everlasting anxious look-out to see that no fast-sailing privateer or pirate sneaks in and picks up one of your charges—it is almost as bad as blockading.

However, all things come to an end sooner or later ; and we were looking forward to a speedy release from our annoyances—having arrived within a couple of days' sail of the Mona Passage—when just after sun-rise the look-out aloft reported a small object apparently a boat, about five miles distant on our port bow. As the weather was beautifully fine, with our convoy bowling along

under every rag of canvas they could spread, and no sign of any lurking picaroons in our neighbourhood, the skipper had our course altered, so as to give the strange object an overhaul. As we ran rapidly down upon it, we perceived that it was indeed a boat, but she showed neither mast nor oar, and we were unable to distinguish any one on board her. When within a mile of her, however, the look-out hailed to say he thought he saw some people lying down in her bottom. A few minutes more, and our doubts were removed by the sight of some person rising for a moment into a sitting position and then sinking down into the bottom of the boat again.

"A shipwrecked crew, apparently," observed the skipper; "but why don't they out oars and stand by to pull alongside?"

"Perhaps they are lying asleep, tired out with a long spell of pulling already?" suggested Mr. Woods, the second lieutenant.

Five minutes afterwards we swept close past her.

"Boat ahoy!" hailed the skipper; and once more a figure appeared for a moment above the boat's gunwale, waved its hand feebly, and sank down again. But—merciful Heaven! what a sight it was, which was thus momentarily presented to our view. The figure was that of a full-grown man clad in the ordinary garb of a Spanish seaman, but the clothes hung about it in rags, and the features were so shrunk that the skin appeared as though strained over a naked skull.

"Good God!" ejaculated Captain Annesley. "Why, they are in the last stage of starvation. Round to and back the mainyard, if you please, Mr. Flinn. Mr. Chester, take the gig, and tow them alongside. Where's the doctor?"

I jumped into the gig, with six hands; she was lowered down, the tackles unhooked, and away we went. A few strokes took us alongside the boat; and I then saw a sight which I shall never forget. The boat seemed full of bodies, all huddled together in the bottom in such a way that it was impossible to count them as they lay there, and the stench which arose was so sickening that we had to hold our nostrils while the painter was being cleared away and made fast.

We were soon alongside the frigate once more, and the doctor with his assistant at once jumped down into the Spanish boat and proceeded to examine its occupants. Three of them proved to be still alive; the remainder were dead and rotted almost out of the semblance of humanity. The survivors were hoisted as carefully as possible on board the frigate; and then, as the best means we could think of for disposing of the boat and her dreadful freight, half a dozen eighteen-pound shot were passed down into her, a

plank knocked out of her bottom, and she was left to sink, which she did before the frigate had sailed many yards from the spot.

The survivors were tended all that day with the utmost care by our worthy medico, and toward evening he was enabled to announce the gratifying intelligence that he hoped to save them all. The next day they were very much better; and on the day following one of them—the man whom we had seen rise up in the boat—was strong enough to tell us his story. I will not repeat it in all its dreadful details of suffering; suffice it to say that their ship, homeward bound from St. Iago, had been attacked by a piratical schooner, the crew of which, after rifling and scuttling the ship, had turned the crew adrift in one of their own boats, without provisions or water, masts or sails; and there they had been, drifting helplessly about the ocean for the to them endless period of nineteen days, without seeing a single sail until we hove in sight.

On the fifth day after rescuing these poor creatures we arrived at Port Royal, where we anchored, while such of our convoy as were bound for Kingston went on up the harbour.

I had heard much respecting the beauty of the Island of Jamaica; and its appearance from the sea, as we had drawn in toward our anchorage, was such as to satisfy me that its attractions had not been overrated. I was anxious to have a run ashore; and was therefore very glad when the skipper, who had business at Kingston, invited me to go with him. I ought to have mentioned, by-the-bye, that he had long ago taken me into his confidence with regard to his engagement to Florrie—had done so, in fact, within a quarter of an hour of the time when he bade her good-bye, so that, though of course he was still the skipper in public, when we happened to be by ourselves he sank the superior officer, and merged into the friendly intimacy of the prospective brother-in-law.

We jumped into the gig and rowed ashore to the wharf at Port Royal, it being the skipper's intention to take a wherry for the trip to Kingston. The moment that our wants were made known, the black boatmen crowded round us in a perfect mob, each extolling the merits of his own boat and depreciating those of the others. From words they soon came to blows, the combatants lowering their heads and butting at each other like goats, until one Hercules of a fellow, having won by force of arms—or rather, by the superior thickness and strength of his woolly skull—the right to convey us to our destination, we were led in triumph by him to his boat, and comfortably stowed away in the stern-sheets. The sea-breeze had by this time set in; and in a few minutes more we were tearing along the five-foot channel at a slashing pace. As we spun along

toward our destination, I could not help remarking upon the perfect safety from attack by an enemy which Kingston enjoys. In the first place, the approach from the outside is of so difficult a character, in consequence of the narrowness and intricacy of the channels between the outlying shoals and reefs, that it would be almost impossible for a stranger to find his way in. If, however, he should by any chance get safely as far as Port Royal, its defences would assuredly stop his further progress ; and then, as though these were not deemed sufficient, a little way up the harbour we come to the Apostle's Battery ; beyond which again is Fort Augusta. Altogether I think I never saw a more strongly-defended place, excepting, of course, Gibraltar.

In due time we reached the wherry-wharf at Kingston, and landed. A quarter of an hour's walk under the piazzas which line the streets in the lower part of the town brought us to Mr. Martin's store, whither we were bound, and on inquiring for him, we were at once shown into his office. The skipper introduced himself and me, explained his business, which was soon done, and then we rose to leave.

As Mr Martin shook hands with us, he said,—

“Excuse me, gentlemen, but have you any engagements for to-day?”

The skipper replied that we had not, we were both strange to the place, and we proposed chartering a carriage for a drive into the country, in order that we might see a few of the far-famed beauties of the island.

“Then pray allow me to be your pilot,” said our new friend. “I have really nothing particular to attend to to-day, and I shall be very happy to show you round. If you can spare so much time, I am going this afternoon to visit a sugar-estate of mine a few miles out of town, stay the night, and return to-morrow morning after breakfast, and I shall be delighted to have the pleasure of your company.”

Nothing could have suited us better ; we accordingly accepted his invitation, and forthwith set off to see what there was to be seen of the town. In the course of our peregrinations we met and were introduced to several of our host's friends, each of whom shook hands with us as though he had known us all our lives, and forthwith gave us a pressing invitation to his “place.”

About four o'clock we returned to Mr. Martin's store, where we found his ketureen—a sort of gig—waiting, and also that of a Mr. Finnie, another sugar-planter who was going to make one of the party. The skipper jumped in alongside of Mr. Martin, I stowed

myself away alongside his friend, and away we dashed up the sandy streets and out of town in the direction of the Blue Mountains.

We reached the estate, and the house upon it, just in time to escape a violent thunder-storm, accompanied by such rain as I had never seen before. It came down literally in *sheets*, completely obscuring everything beyond a couple of dozen yards distant, and rattling upon the thatched roof as though it would beat it in. It lasted about an hour, ceasing as suddenly as it had commenced, and leaving the air clear, cool, and pure.

We had a most excellent dinner, washed down by a glass or two of good wine ; some capital stories illustrative of life on the island were told ; and about midnight we all turned in, I, for one, being almost knocked up by my tramp about Kingston, after the confinement of the ship.

The next morning we took a walk over the estate before breakfast, visiting the negroes' quarters, the sugar-mill, and other buildings, and gaining thereby an appetite which proved most destructive to our host's pickled mackerel, cold boiled tongue, eggs, &c. We made a clean sweep of the comestibles, washed all down with a cup or two of tea, and then started for Kingston, finally arriving on board the "Astarte" about noon.

We remained at Port Royal two days longer, during which we gave the craft a brush of paint inside and out, and otherwise titivated her up after her run out from England, when we received orders to sail upon a three-months' cruise among the Windward Islands. We accordingly weighed, and stood out to sea with the first of the land-breeze ; and, having cleared the shoals, hauled up on the port tack, keeping close under the land to take all possible advantage of the land breeze in making our easting. By midnight we were off Morant Point, from which we took our departure ; and in another hour were tearing along under topgallant-sails, upon a taut bowline, and looking well up for the Island of Grenada, under the influence of a strong trade-wind.

The skipper was most anxious to thoroughly test the sailing powers of the "Astarte," this being the first time that an opportunity had occurred for so doing ; and we accordingly carried on all next day, taxing the toughness of our spars to their utmost limit, and so satisfactory was the result that all hands, fore and aft, felt sanguine that we should meet with very few craft able to beat us either in the matter of speed or weatherliness. The "Astarte" also proved to be a very pretty sea-boat, though a trifle wet when being driven hard—but then, what craft is not ?

As we drew to the southward the trade-wind hauled round a trifle farther from the eastward, its prevailing direction being about E.N.E. This broke us off a couple of points, and set us so much the more to leeward, but beyond that we had nothing to complain of, for the weather continued fine, and the breeze strong and steady.

On the evening of our third day out from Kingston we sighted land on the lee bow, which turned out to be the south end of the Island of Oruba, off the entrance to the Gulf of Maracaybo. We weathered the island cleverly before dark, though without very much room to spare, and passed in between it and Curaçao, making land again about six bells in the middle watch, on the mainland this time, about Hicacos Point. At eight bells in the same watch we tacked ship and stood off shore; and when the sun rose, the Island of Curaçao appeared upon our weather bow. Continuing upon the starboard tack all that day, we hove about again at the beginning of the first dog-watch, thinking that we might possibly be able to pick up a stray Spaniard or Dutchman.

On the following afternoon, about four p.m., land was once more made, directly ahead.

"Land!" murmured little Fisher—who from his diminutive stature had acquired from his fellow-mids the sobriquet of "Six-foot"—"Land! it's nothing but 'land ho!' What land is it, for gracious sake?" to Mr. Carter, the master's mate, who happened to be standing near him.

"The Rocca Islands," answered Carter. "The master says it's a very likely spot in which to find a pirate's nest—just a group of some five-and-twenty rocks, they are not much larger, and one island about ten miles long and six wide, with reefs and shoals all round. Did you ever smell gunpowder, Six-foot?"

"Not yet," answered little Fisher, "but you know this is only my second voyage?"

"And your first was from London to Margate, eh? Well, perhaps you'll have a chance of smelling it before long." And Carter walked away forward.

The little fellow flushed up crimson, and then went pale to the lips.

"Why, Six-foot, what's the matter with you; you are not frightened, are you? Carter was only joking."

"Was he?" said the boy, "I didn't know. You asked me if I felt frightened, Ralph, I don't know whether it was fright or not, but I felt very queer. You know I have never been in action yet, and I think it must be so *dreadful* to hear the shot crashing in through the ship's sides, and to see strong men struck down maimed

and bleeding, or perhaps killed outright, and I have a horrible feeling that when I see these things for the first time I shall turn sick and faint, and perhaps misbehave in some way. And I wouldn't act like a coward for the world ; my father is a very proud man, and I don't think he would ever forgive me for bringing such disgrace on his name."

I could understand the poor little fellow's feelings perfectly, I thought, for had I not experienced something of the same kind myself? I cheered him up as well as I could ; telling him that whenever the time came I felt sure he would behave perfectly well, and that with the firing of the first shot all trace of the peculiar and unpleasant sensations of which he spoke would pass completely away.

I was still talking with him when the skipper's steward came up to us with an invitation for both to dinner in the cabin. The subject was accordingly dropped, and we hurried away to dress.

We were just finishing our soup when Mr. Vining, the third lieutenant, came down to say that two ships had just rounded the southernmost end of the large island, and were working their way in among the shoals towards a small shallow bay on the north-western side.

"What do they look like, Mr. Vining?" queried the skipper.

"One is a full-rigged ship, apparently of about six hundred tons ; the other is a low, wicked-looking brigantine, sir, very loftily rigged, and with an immense spread of canvas."

"Um !" said the skipper. "Just keep a sharp eye upon them, if you please, Mr. Vining, and see what you can make of them. I'll be on deck shortly."

The second lieutenant withdrew, and we hurried on with the meal. By the time that we had finished and were on deck once more, the sun had set, and the short twilight of the tropics was upon us. The islands—mere rocks, as Carter had said—forming the western extremity of the group were already on our lee beam ; the nearest of them being about three miles distant, while others stretched away to leeward of them right away to the horizon, and even beyond it. Key Grande, the largest of the group, lay right ahead, distant about fifteen miles ; while El Roque, another island, lay broad upon our weather bow, about five miles distant. The look-out aloft reported the two strange sail to be just anchoring.

"We've stayed below a trifle too long, I'm afraid," said the skipper ; "we shall have darkness upon us in ten minutes. Mr. Chester, kindly slip up to the topsail-yard and see what you can make out about the strangers, if you please."

"I'll come with you, Ralph, my boy," said Mr. Flinn. "Four eyes are better than two ; and, as I see that the skipper means to give them an overhaul, it is as well that we should learn all we can about them beforehand."

We accordingly shinned up the ratlines together, and were soon comfortably settled on the fore-topsail-yard. We remained there until the brief twilight had so far faded that it was impossible to make out more than the general outline of the ships, and then we descended and made our report.

The said report amounted to this. The brigantine, we had quite made up our minds, was either a privateer or a pirate, but of what nationality, if the former, we were not quite clear, and the ship we took to be a Spaniard of about five hundred tons. The water was breaking so confusedly among and over the reefs ahead of us that we felt very doubtful whether the boats—much less the ship—could find a way through ; but we were of opinion that there was a narrow belt of clear water close to the shore.

Mr. Martin, the master, had meanwhile brought up the chart and spread it open upon the capstan-head ; but the moment that we looked at it and compared it with what we saw around us, it became evident that it was by no means to be relied upon, so far at least as this particular spot was concerned.

"'Bout ship at once, if you please, Mr. Flinn," said the skipper. "We'll go no nearer—on *this* side at all events—I don't half like being so close as we are now. We'll furl the topgallant-sails and take down a reef in the topsails also."

It was done. The reefs now lay astern of us, Key Grande bore well upon our starboard quarter, and El Roque was ahead of us, a trifle upon our weather bow.

"Keep her away a point, quarter-master, and give that island ahead a wide berth," said the skipper.

"Ay, ay, sir," answered Gimbals ; and I thought his voice sounded strange and melancholy in the deepening gloom.

We were now standing to the northward, or about N. by W., under single-reefed topsails, and were going about nine knots, the spot we were in being sheltered by the islands and shoals to windward, and the water consequently smooth. In about half an hour's time, however, the frigate passed out from under the lee of El Roque, and we were once more tearing and thrashing through the short head-sea. The sky to leeward, still aglow with the fading splendour which marked the path of the departed sun, strongly tinged the water in its wake with tints of the purest amber and ruby, against which the wave-crests leaped up black as ink, while the

ocean everywhere else showed a dark indigo hue. Overhead, in the darkening ether, the stars were twinkling out one by one; while away to windward the sky, already nearly as dark as it would be that night, was thickly powdered with a million glittering points.

We continued upon the starboard tack until two bells in the first watch, when, the skipper being of opinion that we had made sufficient offing to go to windward of everything, we tacked ship and stood to the southward and eastward again. It was by this time quite dark, although starlight; and we knew that if the strangers inside had kept a watch upon us, they would have seen us still standing off the land as long as it was possible to see anything at all; and, this being the case, we hoped they would jump to the conclusion that they had seen the last of us, for that night at least, and think no more about us.

By six bells we were dead to windward of the eastern end of El Roque, and about ten miles from it, when we edged away a couple of points, and, getting a good pull upon the weather braces, went rolling and plunging down past the weather side of Key Grande, giving the land a wide berth however, and stationing extra look-outs—the keenest-eyed men in the ship—to watch for any signs of broken water.

Two hours after bearing up, we were off the south-east angle of the island, when we wore ship, and, shortening sail to close-reefed topsails, jib, and spanker, dodged quietly in toward the land, under the lee of which we soon found ourselves. A couple of leadsmen were sent into the chains, and the lead kept constantly going, but we found there was plenty of water, so we stood on until we got into eight fathoms, when, being completely sheltered, we let go the anchor, and stowed our canvas.

It was by this time about two o'clock a.m. The boats had been prepared long before, and nothing now remained but to lower away, unhook, and be off.

As soon as the sails were furled, Captain Annesley went below to his cabin, and immediately sent for Mr. Flinn, Mr. Vining, Mr. Martin, and me. We trundled down one after the other, and found our chief bending anxiously over a chart which was lying spread open upon the cabin-table.

"Pray be seated, gentlemen," said he; "draw your chairs up to the table, and you will all be able to follow me upon the chart. Here is where we are"—making a pencil dot on the chart to indicate the position of the frigate—"and here, as nearly as possible, is where the ship and brigantine are lying"—a cross serving to indicate their position. "Now I feel myself to be in a position of some little difficulty. I

have very little doubt in my own mind that these two ships belong to our enemies, but I am not *sure* of it ; and to attack a vessel belonging to a friendly power would be a most deplorable accident. On the other hand, if we wait until daylight before doing anything, we run the risk of losing a good many of our men ; for I should not feel justified in taking the frigate into the midst of so many unknown dangers, and an attack with the boats in broad daylight would give them ample time to make all their preparations for giving us a hot reception. I am inclined to think that the crews of those two craft will have no expectation of hearing from us to-night ; and I have therefore determined to send in the boats to reconnoitre. You, Mr. Flinn, will have charge of the expedition, and will take the launch. Mr. Vining will take the first cutter, and Mr. Martin the second, while Mr. Chester, in the gig, must go ahead and endeavour to steal alongside the strange craft without giving the alarm, find out their nationality—while you lie off at a distance—and return to you with his report. If they are friends, there is no harm done ; and if they are enemies, do as you think best.”

A few words of advice followed, and we then returned to the deck. The boats were lowered, a twelve-pound carronade placed in the bows of the launch, the fighting-crews paraded, and their weapons examined to see that everything was in fighting order, and then we trundled down over the side and shoved off.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE ROCCA ISLETS.

THE night had grown somewhat darker within the last hour, a few light clouds having come up to windward, spreading themselves over the sky and obscuring a good many of the stars ; so that by the time we had been away from the ship about a quarter of an hour it was impossible to see anything of her except the light which twinkled at her gaff-end, and which might easily have been mistaken for a star.

We rounded the south-west angle of the island ; and soon afterwards found ourselves pulling up a narrow channel between the island and the reefs, in perfectly smooth water, save for the slight undulations of the ground-swell. We reckoned that the strangers were now about two miles distant, so with muffled oars, and in the strictest silence, we paddled gently on, Mr. Flinn leading in the launch. After about half an hour of this work, the launch ceased pulling, the other boats following suit ; and the word was passed for the gig—in which I had been bringing up the rear—to pass ahead. We did so, and in another minute were alongside the leading boat.

“We can’t be far off them now, Ralph,” said Paddy in a loud whisper, “so just go aisy ahead, me darlint, and see what you can find out. And don’t be a month of Sundays about it, aither, you spalpeen, for we’ll soon be havin’ the daylight upon us ; indade it looks to me as if the sky is lightin’ up to the east’ard already, so we’ve no time to spare.”

“Never fear,” said I, “I’ll not be a moment longer than I can help. Give way, gigs, and pass the word for the bow oar to lay in and keep a bright look-out ahead.

We swept silently away, the stroke oar having orders to keep his eye on the boats as long as it was possible to see them ; and he was just reporting to me in a whisper that he had lost sight of them when the bow man gave the word “oars,” and said he could see something broad on our port bow. The boat’s head was sheered

to port, and at the same moment I caught sight of the brigantine's spars showing up black and indistinct against the dark sky. She was not above fifty yards away from us, and I had just given the word to paddle quietly ahead when a voice hailed us in Spanish, ordering us to keep off or they would fire. Before we could reply, *crash* came a volley of musketry at us, tearing up the water all round the boat, and one poor fellow dropped his oar and fell forward off his seat.

"Give way, men!" I shouted. "Dash at her and get alongside before they have time to load again. The other boats will be here to support us in a moment."

The men required no second bidding, but, bending to their oars until the stout ash bent like fishing-rods and the water flashed from the blades in luminous foam, they sent the boat like an arrow in under the main chains, dropping their oars and seizing their cutlasses as we sheered alongside, and springing like grey-hounds slipped from the leash at the craft's low bulwarks.

But we had been reckoning without our hosts. Instead of finding the crew all below comfortably asleep in their hammocks, there they were at quarters, with guns loaded and run out, boarding-nettings triced up, and in fact everything ready to repel an attack, and it was only our extremely cautious approach which had saved us from a broadside or two of grape. Our people cut and slashed at the netting in a vain attempt to hew a passage through it, and were either shot down or thrust back with boarding-pikes; those who attempted to creep in at the ports receiving similar treatment. And all the time the small-arm men were playing briskly upon us with their muskets; so that at the end of five minutes I found myself with all hands beaten back into the boat, and every one of us, fore and aft, suffering from wounds more or less severe.

"Come, lads!" I exclaimed; "take another slap at them; we *must* get on deck somehow. You Jones, give me a hoist up on your shoulders; I think I can see a hole in the netting; here—a foot farther aft—so, that's well. Now *heave*."

And up I went, clear above the craft's gunwale and neatly in through the hole which I had espied. I should have fallen on the deck on my head, and probably dislocated my neck had not a brawny Spaniard happened to be immediately beneath me. Taken by surprise at my abrupt appearance, he had not time to get out of my way or even to strike at me, and before he could recover himself my pistol was at his temple and he staggered backward, shot through the head. In his fall, he forced back two or three of those nearest him, creating a momentary confusion. One of the

gigs was at that instant struggling to get in through the open port near me, and I bent down, seized him by the collar, and lugged him in on deck, recovering myself just in time to ward off a savage cutlass-blow.

Jones—who happened to be the man I had dragged inboard—was on his feet in an instant, and, placing himself alongside me, we both pressed a little forward, so as to leave room for the rest of the gigs to follow by the same entrance while we covered them.

At the same moment a ringing cheer was heard forward ; there was a rush of many feet, and Flinn with his party poured aft, having come quietly in over the bows while the crew were engaged with us aft.

“Launches to the rescue !” he shouted ; “Hurroo, me bhoys ! lay it on thick and heavy. Don’t give them time to recover themselves ; if the naygurs won’t go below or throw down their arrums, just haive them overboard.”

The onslaught of the three other boats’ crews—which, having stolen quietly up in the confusion and slipped in over the bows without molestation, were perfectly fresh—was irresistible. The brigantine’s crew were forced in a body right aft to the taffrail, when, to avoid being cut down where they stood, or driven overboard, they threw down their arms and begged for quarter.

Lights were procured ; the prisoners were passed below and secured ; and we then had time to turn our attention to the other craft. Where was she ? During the skirmish I had caught a momentary glimpse of her at about a cable’s length on our port beam through the glancing of the pistol-flashes on her spars and rigging, but now she was nowhere to be seen.

“Matthews,” said Mr. Flinn, “take a blue-light from the launch into the fore-top and burn it.”

In less than a minute the glare of the blue-light illumined the scene with a ghastly radiance ; and there, about a quarter of a mile distant, was the ship under way, standing to the northward and westward under jib and spanker, with her topsails just let fall ready for sheeting home.

“Oh, ho ! Is it that you’re afther thin, me foine fellow ?” exclaimed Flinn, who always dropped into his native brogue under the influence of excitement. “By the powers but we’ll soon sthop that little game. Fore-top there ! That’ll do with the blue-light. Jump on the topsail-yard and cast off the gaskets. Lay out and loose the jib and fore-topmast-staysail, some of you ; and Mr. Chester, kindly get this mainsail set at once, if you please.”

“All ready with the topsail, sir,” sang out the man aloft.

"Then let fall, and come down, casting loose the foresail as you do so. Sheet home the topsail, lads ; that's well ! man the halliards and up with the yard. Hoist away the jib and staysail ; fore sheets over to starboard. One hand to the wheel and put it hard-a-port. Cut the cable, forward there. Round in upon the starboard braces—ease off your main sheet, slack it away and let the boom go well out. Now she has stern-way upon her. Capital. Now fill your topsail—smartly, lads !—and haul aft your lee head sheets. Steady your helm. Now she draws ahead. Hard up with the helm. There she pays off ! Square the fore yard ; gently with your weather-braces—don't round in upon them too quickly. Well there ; belay !"

All this had passed almost as quickly as the description can be read, and we were now under way and steering directly after the ship, which had only succeeded in getting her topsails sheeted home and the fore-topsail partially hoisted.

"Is that gun ready forward, Mr. Vining ?" asked Flinn.

"All ready, sir," answered Vining.

"Then burn another blue-light and throw a shot over him."

Up flared once more the ghostly light ; the ship, like a vast phantom, loomed out against the black sky directly ahead, and after a momentary pause the sharp report of the brass nine-pounder rang out forward, the flash lighting up the chase for an instant, and bringing every rope, spar, and sail into clear relief, while the sound was repeated right and left by the echoing cliffs of the island astern, and the startled sea-birds wheeled screaming all round us.

No notice was taken by the ship of our polite request that she should heave-to ; on the contrary, every effort seemed to be put forth to get the canvas set as speedily as possible.

But the brigantine was slipping through the water three feet to their one, under the influence of the light baffling breeze which came down to us from over the lofty cliffs astern, and we were soon within hailing distance.

"Mr. Martin, are the starboard guns loaded ?" asked Mr. Flinn.

"Yes, sir," was the reply. "Loaded with round and grape."

"Then elevate the muzzles of the guns as much as possible, if you please. I am going to range up alongside on the ship's port quarter, when we will pour in our broadside and board in the smoke. If we are not smart, both ships will be ashore on the reefs. Mr. Vining, kindly take charge of the brigantine, with four hands ; the rest prepare to follow me on board the ship."

We were by this time close to the chase, on board which all was dark and silent as the grave.

“Stand by to heave the grapplings, fore and aft. Now port your helm, my man—Jones, isn’t it? That’s right, hard-a-port and run her alongside. This way, lads, our cat-head is your best chance. Hurroo! boarders away!” shouted Flinn, and away went the whole party swarming over the ship’s lofty bulwarks helter-skelter, like a parcel of school-boys at play, our entire star-board broadside going off with a rattling crash at the same instant.

And then uprose from the deck of the ship an infernal chorus of shrieks, groans, yells, and curses from those of her crew who had been mown down by our shot, mingling horribly with the cheers of our people, the oaths of those who opposed us, the popping of pistols, and the clash of steel. There were about forty men on board, chiefly Spanish desperadoes, who fought like incarnate fiends; but they had no chance when once we were on board, and after contesting every inch of the deck until they, like the crew of their consort, had been driven aft to the taffrail, in which obstinate resistance they lost more than half their number, the survivors sullenly flung down their arms and surrendered.

The next business was to attend to the safety of both vessels, which were now perilously near the reefs ahead. Half a dozen men were sent on board the brigantine to assist those already there in working her, when the grapplings were cast off, the brigantine starboarded her helm while we ported ours, and the two ships separated, to haul up on opposite tacks.

The ship’s sails were not above half set, so as soon as we had hauled her to the wind the halliards were manned and the topsail-yards got chock up to their sheaves, the courses let fall, tacks boarded, and sheets hauled aft, when we eased the helm down and threw her in stays.

Day was by this time beginning to break. The sky overhead was lighting up, the stars paling out and fading away, while surrounding objects began to loom ghost-like and indistinct in the first grey of the early dawn. The brigantine was just visible about half a mile ahead and inshore of us, apparently hove-to. As we drew up abreast of her she filled her topsail and stood on in company, the ship by this time under every stitch of canvas, up to top-gallantsails, while the brigantine drew ahead of us under mainsail, topsail, and jib, and was obliged to shiver her topsail every now and then in order to avoid running away from us.

In twenty minutes more we rounded the point, and there lay the “Astarte,” a couple of miles off, rolling heavily upon the ground-

swell. On reaching her, both our prizes were hove-to as close to the frigate and to each other as was consistent with safety, and Mr. Flinn and I jumped into the gig and went on board to report.

"Well, Mr. Flinn," said the skipper, meeting us at the gangway, "glad to see you back safe and sound ; you too, Mr. Chester," shaking hands with us both. "But how is this ? Are you hurt, Ralph ?" as on my facing to the eastward the light fell upon my face, and he saw blood upon it.

"A broken skull, sir ;" I replied, "nothing *very* serious though, I believe."

"And what's the news ?" continued the skipper. "I see you have brought both vessels out with you. What are they ?"

"To tell you the truth, sir," answered Flinn, "we have had no time yet to find out *what* they are. They are both Spaniards, however, and, if I am not greatly mistaken, we shall find that the brigantine is little better than a pirate."

"Um !" said the skipper, "likely enough ; she has all the look of it. And now, what about casualties ? have you suffered much ?"

"Rather severely, sir, I am sorry to say. Five killed, and eighteen—or rather, nineteen with Mr. Chester—wounded ; eight of them severely. I am afraid we shall lose little Fisher, sir."

"Lose little Fisher !" exclaimed the skipper. "Why, whoever was thoughtless enough to let that poor child go upon so dangerous an expedition ?"

Flinn looked at me, and I at him ; but neither of us could plead guilty, so the matter dropped for the time.

The surgeon and his assistant now trundled down over the side, with their tools under their arms, and went on board the prizes to attend to the poor fellows who were wounded, Mr. Flinn returning with them to arrange the prize-crews, and to anchor the prizes, the skipper having come to the determination to remain in smooth water until the wounded had all been attended to and placed comfortably in their own hammocks on board the frigate.

In the mean time I trundled down into the midshipmen's berth, bathed my wound—a scalp-wound about six inches long—in cold water, clapped on a quarter of a yard of diachylon plaster, a sheet of which I always took the precaution to keep in my own chest, snatched a mouthful or so of biscuit and cold meat, and then returned to the deck to see if I could be of use.

"Oh ! I've been looking for you, sir," said the captain's steward, as I put my head above the coamings. "The captain wishes to see you in his cabin at once, if you please, sir."

"Is he there now, Polson? All right, then, I'll go down to him forthwith," and away I went.

"Come in!" said the deep, musical voice of the skipper, in answer to my knock. I entered.

"Oh! It's you, Ralph. Come in and sit down. I see you have been doing a little patching up on your own account. Is it very bad?"

"Thank you, no; a mere breaking of the skin," I replied. "I shall be as good as new in a day or two, I hope."

"That's well. Still you had better let Mr. Oxley look at it when he is at leisure. Very trifling wounds turn out badly sometimes in this hot climate. And now—I want to speak to you about that poor lad Fisher. I am told he was in the gig with you."

"In the gig with me!" I echoed taken thoroughly by surprise. "I assure you, Captain Annesley, I was quite unaware of it, then. Indeed, I was not aware that he had left the ship until Mr. Flinn spoke of him as being wounded. I haven't even seen him throughout the affair."

"I am glad to hear that," said the skipper, his brow clearing. "To tell you the whole truth, Ralph, I have been feeling very angry with you; for when I heard that the poor boy had gone in your boat, I quite thought it must have been with your connivance. And I need scarcely point out to you that I could not approve of such a child as that being allowed to take part in an expedition of so dangerous a character, where he would only be in the way, and could be of no possible assistance. However, since you say that you know nothing about it, I suppose he must have slipped down into the boat surreptitiously and stowed himself away. Now, as there is nothing particular for you to do, you may as well—"

At this moment Mr. Flinn entered.

"Sit down, Mr. Flinn, sit down, man," said the skipper. "Well, how are things looking on board the prizes by this time?"

"Capitally, sir, I am happy to say," replied Flinn, with a beaming phiz. "The wounded have nearly all been attended to, and we may begin to transfer them at once. Little Fisher seems in a somewhat more promising condition now that his wounds have been dressed, and the others are also doing well. As to the prizes, the brigantine has such a heterogeneous assortment of goods in her hold that her cargo alone, which is very valuable, is sufficient to betray her character. Her skipper was killed—by you, Ralph, if I understand them rightly—early in the attack, but the mate, or lieutenant as he calls himself, swears she is a privateer. However, as he cannot produce anything like a commission, I am very glad I

am not in his shoes. The craft is called the 'Juanita,' and the mate says they were bound from Cumana to Cartagena, but his papers look to me remarkably like forgeries. The ship is the 'San Nicolas,' bound from La Guayra to Cadiz, with a general cargo and—two large boxes of silver bricks, which we found stowed away down in the run. *Her* papers are all perfectly correct, and she is evidently a prize to the brigantine. The rascals on board her profess to be her regular crew, and disown all acquaintance with the crew of the 'Juanita,' but there are twice as many men on board as are entered in the ship's books, and altogether their tale is far too flimsy to hold water. I have no doubt they are a prize-crew from the 'Juanita,' and that the ship's crew have all been murdered. So that we have done a very good night's work, I think."

"Capital," said the skipper. "Couldn't well be better, except for our losses in killed and wounded. Let the poor fellows be transferred at once, if you please, Mr. Flinn. When they are all stowed comfortably away, we will shift the silver into the frigate also; then there will not be much fear of its recapture. And lastly, we will shift the prisoners over to the frigate; then the prizes will not require such large prize-crews."

We then went on deck together, and I went away in the launch to effect the transfer of our killed and wounded. This was a long and painful business, some of the wounded requiring the most careful handling; but it was done at last, and by the end of the afternoon watch everything was ready for us to weigh and proceed to sea again, which we at once did; the prizes being ordered to rendezvous at Barbadoes.

Mr. Vining, the third lieutenant, had charge of the "San Nicolas," while the "Juanita" was entrusted to Carter, the master's mate, who had strict injunctions to stick close to and protect the ship.

We weighed in a body, and stood away to the southward, close-hauled on the larboard tack; the frigate cracking on, and leaving her prizes to follow at their best pace. Vining also carried on upon the "San Nicolas," giving her every stitch of canvas she could show, while Carter had to haul down a couple of reefs in his mainsail and topsail, reef his foresail, and stow his flying-jib and fore-topmast-staysail in order to moderate his speed to that of his consort.

At two bells in the first dog-watch, the crew were mustered, the men having cleaned and shifted their rig for the occasion, while the officers appeared in full-dress, sail was shortened, and the ship

hove-to. The bodies of the five poor fellows who had fallen in the attack of the previous night were placed in the lee gangway, sewn up in their hammocks, each with an eighteen-pound shot at his feet, and the ensign spread over them as a pall. The skipper stationed himself at their heads with the prayer-book in his hand, and, having looked along the deck fore and aft to satisfy himself that everything was as it should be, took off his cocked hat, the rest of us uncovering at his example.

“I am the Resurrection and the Life, saith the Lord. He that believeth in Me, though he were *dead*, yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth in Me shall *never* die.”

The words, in all their solemn beauty of promise, uttered in a voice which quivered slightly with emotion, fell clearly and distinctly from the captain's lips, and went straight to the hearts of the throng of ocean warriors who had gathered to bid a last long, sad farewell to their fallen comrades, and to consign them with all honour to a sailor's grave. The bronzed and bearded faces of the listeners wore an expression of gravity well suited to the most solemn ceremonial of the Christian faith, and as the impressive service proceeded, more than one of the stalwart seamen, who had a few hours before fought side by side with those who now lay at their feet wrapped cold and stark in their bloody shrouds, dashed with a hasty and furtive hand the unwonted tears away.

Nor were the externals of the scene altogether inappropriate to the occasion. The frigate, pausing in her rapid flight, swayed slowly and majestically upon the bosom of the surges which would soon receive the bodies of her dead heroes, and hung, as if in sentient grief, over the spot which was to be their tomb. Her graceful hull, lofty spars, and snowy canvas gleamed refulgent in the last rays of the setting sun as he sank to his rest through a bank of rainbow-tinted clouds, and the rising wind sobbed and moaned dirge-like through her taut rigging.

At length the glorious luminary touched the horizon, staining the bosom of the waters to a deep rosy hue, and flinging a broad pathway of glittering molten gold from the ocean's rim across the restless billows clear up to the frigate's side. Slowly sank the broad disk behind the purple horizon, as the solemn ceremony drew to an end. The ensign, that meteor flag, beneath whose folds so many heroes have fought and died, was gently raised, and at the words “Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God of His great mercy to take unto Himself the souls of our dear brothers here departed, we therefore commit their bodies to the deep”—the inner ends of the gratings upon which the dead lay were slowly elevated, the

sullen plunge of the bodies smote upon the ear, and the last ray of the departing sun flashed upon the swirling eddies where they had disappeared, dyeing them deep in crimson and gold.

The ocean suddenly darkened, the gorgeous cloud-tints faded into tender grey, and, as the service came to a conclusion, a gun boomed the frigate's farewell to her lost ones; the main yard was swung; and the dead were left to their last long sleep deep within the sheltering bosom of the ocean they had loved in life so well.

We stood on until midnight, when we tacked to the northward; in which direction we steered during the whole of next day and the following night, when we deemed ourselves far enough to windward to enable us to pass between the Islands of St. Lucia and St. Vincent and fetch Barbadoes on the other tack.

In the meantime all the wounded were doing well except poor little Fisher. His injuries were of a very serious nature, a cutlass-blow having cloven his right shoulder until it had nearly severed the arm from the body, and his right lung was penetrated by a pike-thrust. The skipper had ordered a cot to be slung for the little fellow in his own cabin, and thither I went as often as I could, to sit beside him, help him to the cooling drinks which our kind-hearted medico had concocted for him, and cheer him up when his spirits drooped, as they too often did. Exhausted by loss of blood and severe physical suffering, his nervous system appeared to have completely broken down, and the incessant heave and roll of the ship distressed him almost beyond his powers of endurance.

"Oh! Chester," he said to me one day, "if I could but be on shore, I believe I should get better. It tires me out to lie here, hour after hour, watching the sway of the ship. And then it is so dreadfully hot here, although the stern-ports are always open. What I should like is to be on shore, in a nice large room, with the windows open and the sea-breeze rushing in, laden with the odour of flowers, and to lie and listen to the rustle of leaves, and watch the branches of the trees swaying in the wind, with the birds and butterflies glancing to and fro, and the sunlight glittering upon the water. I can't sleep now, with the tramping of feet overhead, the creaking of the bulkheads, and the everlasting wash of the sea sounding in my ears, but I believe I *could* sleep then; and if I could sleep I feel that I should get better."

A day or two after he had said this, I went down to see him toward evening, and at the cabin-door I met the doctor just coming out.

"How is he this evening, doctor?" I inquired.

"Worse; very much worse. I am beginning to despair of him

now. He is light-headed, and I question if he will recognize you," was the discouraging reply.

I went in and found the skipper himself standing by the cot, holding one dry burning hand in his, listening to the incoherent ramblings of the poor lad, and endeavouring to soothe him. Home scenes and incidents of school-days seemed to be uppermost in his mind at the moment that I entered, but soon afterwards his thoughts wandered away to the night of the attack.

"I must go, I *must* go," he exclaimed in anxious tones; "if it be only to prove whether I *am* a coward or no. Chester spoke *very* kindly to me, but I believe he thinks I am afraid. It will be dreadful, I know—the flashing cutlasses, the fierce thrust of pikes, and perhaps the fire of grape and canister. And there will be gaping wounds, and blood—blood everywhere; and oh! the suffering there will be; I have read of it all—the burning, unquenchable thirst, the throbbing and quivering of agonized limbs, and the upturned glance of unendurable torture. How can I possibly bear to look upon it all? And perhaps *I* may be one of the wounded—or the slain. And if I am, what then? I do not care about pain for myself, I can bear it; but it is the sufferings of others that I dread to see. And if I am killed—why, I shall die doing my duty, and I am not afraid of death; I have never done anything that I need be ashamed of; I never did anything mean or dishonourable; I have always tried to be kind to every one; and I have read the Bible regularly which my poor dear mother gave me."

He paused a little. Then the tears welled slowly up into his eyes. "I am dying—I know it, though none of them have said so. I wonder whether my father will be sorry. He is a proud man and stern—very stern; I cannot remember that he ever kissed me, and I have never been able to tell whether he cares for me or no. But I believe he does—I *hope* he does; and at all events, he need not be ashamed of me, for I have proved that I am no coward. My mother will grieve for me, though; it will break her heart and—oh!"

Here a violent flood of tears came to the poor boy's relief, and he sobbed as though his heart would break.

"Phew!" exclaimed the skipper. "This will *never* do; he is too weak to bear this, I am sure. Run for Oxley, and tell him to come at once, Ralph; we must stop this at any cost."

I rushed out of the cabin, and returned in another minute with the doctor.

The poor boy was still sobbing occasionally, but he was crying more quietly now, and lying quite still in his hammock, instead of moving his limbs restlessly about as he had been.

The doctor leaned over the cot, felt his pulse, and laid his hand upon his patient's forehead.

"It is a dreadful tax upon his already exhausted strength," said the medico, "but I believe in the present case it has done good rather than harm. However, it will not do to risk a repetition of this sort of thing, so I will give him a mild opiate, although I would much rather not, in his present exhausted condition."

He leaned over the cot once more with his finger on the lad's pulse, and gazed long and anxiously in the pale, upturned face, as though revolving in his mind some weighty problem. Then, turning abruptly away, he left the cabin, beckoning me to follow.

As he was mixing the draught in the dispensary, he remarked,—

"If he can only last out until we reach Barbadoes, I believe we might save him yet; but it is this constant motion which is irritating his wound, and sapping his life. When do you think we shall get in?"

"To-morrow morning, if the breeze holds," I replied.

"Too late, I am afraid," said my companion, shaking his head. "The patient is in such a critical state that a few hours more or less may make all the difference between life and death to him. However, I will not give him up without a fight. Mr. Stuart and I will watch him through the night, and perhaps you could arrange to stay with him through the dog-watches, could you?"

"Assuredly," I replied. "I will speak to Mr. Flinn about it, and I am sure he will excuse me."

"Very well, then; that's arranged," said the doctor. "Now run away with that draught. If the poor boy is still agitated, give it him at once; if not, keep it by you for the present."

I returned to the cabin, and found that little Six-foot had stopped crying, and seemed disposed to sleep, so I put the bottle in a place of safety, and whispered to the skipper the doctor's arrangement.

"All right," he returned. "You remain here. I must go on deck now; and I will mention to Flinn that you will not be on deck during the dog-watch."

He stole out on tiptoe, and I was alone with my patient. I settled myself in a low chair near the cot, and looked out through the stern-port. The sun was just setting, and the western sky glowed with the same gorgeous colouring which it had worn on the evening of the funeral. The sight reminded me of the sad incident, and I wondered whether we were to have a sadder one yet. I sat for some time lost in mournful thought, when there was a slight stir in the cot, and I heard little Fisher's voice say weakly,—

"Is that you, Ralph, sitting there? It is so dark I can scarcely make you out."

"Yes, it is I," I answered cheerfully. "How are you now, Six-foot? You have had a bit of a snooze, have you not?"

"I believe I *have* been dozing," he replied. "I seem *very* weak, Ralph, and I have scarcely any feeling left in my legs. I fancy I shall not last many hours longer."

"Oh, nonsense!" I returned. "What has put that idea into your head? Why, we shall be in Carlisle Bay by sunrise to-morrow; and then, if you are strong enough to bear removal, you can have your wish as to going on shore, you know. And once there, you will *soon* pull round, old fellow. No more rolling and knocking about then, Harry; no more groaning bulkheads; but the quiet and coolness that you have been longing for, with the sea-breeze, and trees, the birds and butterflies, and tender women to nurse and pet and make much of you, instead of us clumsy people. Only think of it! Why, by this time to-morrow you will feel so much better for the change that you will be wanting to sit up in bed—or even to turn out, perhaps."

"Oh, no, no," he replied. "I am far worse than you seem to think, Ralph. Still, I believe I *might* pull round even yet, if I could but get ashore."

"Well, look here," said I. "If you are to be moved to-morrow, it is of the greatest importance that you should have a *good* night's rest to-night, so try, like a dear good fellow, to get to sleep again, will you? Do you feel thirsty?"

"Rather," he replied. "But I seem to want something different from that stuff that the doctor has mixed for me. If I could only get a little fruit now—a bit of one of those pines you brought on board at Kingston, for instance—I believe it would refresh me more than anything else."

"Would it?" said I; "then you shall have it; that is, if the doctor will allow it; for now that you speak of it, I know the skipper has one or two pines left, and I am certain you will be heartily welcome to them. Do you mind being by yourself for a minute or two, while I run to the doctor, and speak to him about it? All right; I will be back in a second."

The doctor saw no objection, so we soon had a splendid pine sliced up, and I held a thin piece to the poor little sufferer's lips. It refreshed him greatly, and after another draught of the acid mixture he settled down more comfortably than he had been at all. When I turned him over to the doctor at last and left the cabin, there seemed to be some slight improvement in his condition.

In the early dawn of the following morning we anchored in Carlisle Bay, Barbadoes, and by noon poor little Fisher had been safely conveyed on shore and lodged in the colonel's residence near Needham Point, where he would have all the ladies belonging to the garrison to nurse him, and be conveniently situated for frequent visits from the staff-surgeon.

CHAPTER XXVI.

▲ GOOD MORNING'S WORK.



OUR prizes of course had not arrived, so, having seen little Fisher comfortably bestowed, landed our silver at the dockyard, and handed over our prisoners to the proper authorities, we weighed again that same evening, and proceeded northward upon our cruise.

When off Martinique, which had fallen into our hands in the early part of the preceding year, we spoke the British frigate "Blanche," steering towards Barbadoes. Her skipper came on board the "Astarte," and, in reply to Captain Annesley's inquiries, reported that they had done nothing since the capture of the French frigate "Pique" in January, on which occasion Captain Faulkner, the former skipper of the "Blanche" and a most promising officer, was killed. Her present captain (Watkins, acting) expressed great disgust at the state of affairs, and, rather cynically, ventured to hope we should have better luck than he had met with.

Nothing worthy of mention occurred until we arrived off Guadeloupe. We had made a thorough inspection of all the neighbouring islands, beginning with Mariegalante, and had looked into Point-à-Pitre Harbour on the Grand Terre without making any discovery, when, one evening, while beating up under the south side of Désirade, we espied a schooner at anchor near the shore and directly under the guns of a fort. Preparations were immediately made for cutting her out; the frigate tacking meanwhile, and reaching off the shore again in order to lull any suspicions the Frenchmen may have had as to our intentions.

We worked up round the north-east end of the island, and it being by that time as dark as it would be, the frigate hove-to, and the boats, properly manned and armed, were despatched under sail. I took no part in this expedition, as I had shared in the other, and the skipper was anxious to give all his "young gentlemen" as far as possible equal opportunities of distinguishing themselves. The

boats sent away on this occasion were the first cutter, under Mr. Woods, the second lieutenant, the second cutter, under Gimbals, the quarter-master, with little Smellie to lend a hand, and the jolly-boat, under the command of no less a personage than Mr. Robert Summers.

We allowed them an hour and a quarter to get down to the schooner, at the expiration of which time we filled and stood after them.

As we rounded the end of the island I slipped up as far as the fore-topmast crosstrees, to see if I could make out anything of what was going on. All was perfectly dark and quiet to leeward, however, for the first ten minutes of my stay, and then I saw a bright flash—another—a third—then two more in quick succession, and presently the distant *boom* of heavy guns came rumbling up to windward.

“Ah!” thought I. “That is the battery playing upon our people, I expect.”

The fire was kept up pretty briskly for about ten minutes, and then it ceased. Shortly afterwards a red light appeared in-shore of us (the preconcerted signal of success), and almost immediately after its appearance I could make out the schooner, on board which it was displayed, coming out from under the land. A quarter of an hour afterwards she was hove-to on our lee quarter.

Mr. Woods’ report was to the effect that he had got on board without much resistance and without any casualties, but that the schooner had been anchored so close in under the battery that its garrison had heard the sounds of the scuffle, and had, upon the schooner’s weighing, opened fire upon her with effect, hulling her several times, inflicting rather severe injuries from splinters upon four of our people, breaking Master Bob Summers’ right leg below the knee, and cutting poor old Gimbals in two.

The schooner was a French privateer mounting eight long-sixes, and a long-nine upon her forecastle, with a crew of forty men.

Arrangements were being made for the transfer of the prisoners to the frigate when the French skipper sent a message begging that, before anything else were done, he might be favoured with an interview with Captain Annesley. The request was granted; he was brought on board the “*Astarte*” in the gig, and conducted below into the skipper’s cabin.

He was there for about half an hour, and when he at length returned to his own ship, orders were sent to Mr. Woods to secure the schooner’s crew below and make sail in company with the frigate. We both accordingly bore up, and running round the

south-west end of the island, hauled up for North-East Bay in the Grand Terre, which we reached by daylight next morning.

Here a fine frigate was found snugly anchored in the south-east corner of the bay, in a sheltered bight, and under the protection of a battery mounting ten heavy guns.

It now came out that this frigate, a French craft of forty guns named "L'Artemise," had arrived at the islands on the previous day, and, hearing of our being in the neighbourhood, had immediately made her way to the spot where we had found her ; whether to be in wait for us, or to hide from us, could not yet be said. The skipper of the schooner had picked up this piece of news, and had bargained with our captain to pilot him to the place where the French ship lay on condition that he, with his ship and crew, should be allowed to go free. The bargain was struck ; our skipper insisting, however, upon the total disarming of the schooner.

The "Astarte" and her prize now hove-to ; and, being still in deep water, orders were sent on board the schooner, to flood her magazine, and to throw her guns and all the small arms into the sea, leaving weapons only in the hands of the master and his two subordinates, for the maintenance of proper discipline. This done, and all our people being taken out of the schooner, Captain Annesley wrote out a challenge to the captain of the French frigate and sent it in by the schooner. We then hoisted our colours and fired a gun. The French frigate and the battery on shore hoisted the tricolour soon afterwards ; but though we watched the schooner into the anchorage, and saw a boat go from her to the frigate presumably with our challenge, no farther notice was taken of our presence ; the frigate remaining all day obstinately at anchor in her secure position.

Of course everybody on board the "Astarte" was on the *qui vive* during the whole of that day. Our three tops were permanently occupied by relays of officers ; and every telescope, good, bad, or indifferent, was kept constantly levelled at the noble craft inshore.

As for Captain Annesley, he never left the deck a moment as long as daylight lasted, except to snatch a hasty mouthful at meal times ; and he that day exhibited the nearest approach to ill-temper that I ever saw in him.

At length night fell ; and still no sign had been made by the Frenchmen. Dinner had been postponed for an hour in the cabin, in hopes that the frigate would yet come out ; and when at last all hope had been given up, the whole of the officers were invited to dine with the skipper.

At sunset we wore round and stood away to the southward.

The conversation round the captain's mahogany that night was naturally upon one topic only, namely, how to get hold of the frigate.

Captain Annesley listened with exemplary patience to all that was said ; and, at last, when every possible suggestion, practicable and impracticable, had been made, he said,—

“Thank you, gentlemen, one and all, for your very valuable suggestions, none of which, however—if I may be excused for saying so—strike me as being so simple as the one I have myself thought upon. It is this. I propose returning during the night to a spot near where the French frigate lies—I marked it particularly to-day, while we were lying off and on—and sending a boat's crew ashore about an hour before daybreak to-morrow morning, to see what can be done with that battery. They will, of course, be kept upon the tiptoe of expectation all night to-night, anticipating an attempt to cut the frigate out, or something of that sort. Toward morning, however, hearing nothing of us, and being fatigued moreover by their night's watch, they will relax their vigilance ; and then I think perhaps something may be achieved in the nature of a surprise. I say a *surprise*, because, whatever is done, I should like done without giving the frigate the alarm. The battery once in our possession, be it only for five minutes, those heavy guns, of which I so much dislike the look, may be spiked ; and *then* we shall have nothing to do but run into the bay, lay the frigate alongside, and help ourselves. Now, what do you think of my plan ? ”

“Capital ! Excellent ! The very thing ! ” was the verdict, and everybody applauded to the echo, as of course in duty bound to do. But, apart from that, it really was an excellent proposal, and far better than any of the previous suggestions.

“Very well, then,” resumed the skipper. “Now as to details. The surprise and silencing of that battery is, as you must all see, a matter of the last importance, and will need a cool and steady hand as leader of the expedition. I cannot spare many men, as we are short of our complement already ; and I have an idea that the French craft, ill-disposed as she seems to come out to us, will make a gallant defence when we go in to her. For the same reason, I can ill spare any of my officers. Under such circumstances, who, in your opinion, should be sent to deal with the battery ? ”

There was a dead silence for a minute. Then up spake Paddy Flinn.

“Bedad thin,” said he, his eyes sparkling with animation, “it's myself would like to take the job in hand if it was *shtorrrming* the battery that was wanted, captain, darlint ; but since it's a surprise,

for your own sake and that of iverybody else, don't send me ; for I *know* I'd be puttin' me fut in it and raising no end of a distorbance before I'd done wid it."

There was a hearty laugh at this frank speech, in which the skipper joined until the tears rolled down his cheeks.

"No, no, Flinn," said he. "You are the last man I should think of sending upon such a business. Besides, I shall want you to lead one of the boarding-parties, where I know you will be in your element. Mr. Woods, I shall also want *you*; and I really don't see how I can well do without you, Mr. Martin. So that we now come down to the midshipmen ; and to tell the candid truth, young gentlemen, I have great qualms about entrusting so important a business to any of *you*. What do you say, Ralph, do you think you could manage so delicate a business without making a hash of it?"

"Yes, sir," said I, "I believe I could. At all events, I'll *undertake* to *silence* the battery ; and if care and patience will enable me to do so without alarming the frigate, it shall be done."

"Very well, then," said the skipper ; "you shall conduct the enterprise ; and remember that a surprise is eminently desirable, but that the spiking of the guns is *an imperative necessity*."

We sat a little while longer, and then, rising and making our bows, retired in a body.

We stood on until within an hour and a half of midnight, when we wore ship and began to retrace our steps.

By three o'clock next morning we were off the spot which Captain Annesley had selected for the landing (a small strip of sandy beach, distant about a mile to the southward of the southernmost end of North-East Bay) ; and the frigate was once more hove-to.

The first cutter, which was the boat selected for the service, was lowered, and at four a.m. left the ship, having on board twenty picked men, in addition to the coxswain and myself, all fully armed.

On approaching the shore, we found ourselves to all appearance with a rock-bound coast under our lee, upon which the sea was breaking with considerable violence. As we drew closer in, however, I made out the point behind which the landing-place was situate, and in five minutes afterwards we slid round the projection and found ourselves in smooth water, with the beach close aboard. Giving the boat good way, we ran her well up on the sand, and all hands jumped out except two, who were to remain in her as boat-keepers. She was then shoved off again ; the two men in charge being instructed to keep a bright look-out, and to be prepared to back in and receive us at a moment's notice, in the event of anything going wrong.

I then paraded my small command, and, first repeating to them their instructions, led the way up the steep slope of the cliff. It was very dark, the moon—what there was of her—having set nearly an hour before ; but, by dint of great caution and taking our time about it, we safely reached the top of the cliff in about ten minutes. Here all hands lay down upon the grass, while I went forward on hands and knees over the brow of the hill to reconnoitre. It was some little time before I could distinguish anything but the black shapeless bulk of the land before me ; but at length I made out something which I thought was the battery, at a distance of about a quarter of a mile away, and at a somewhat lower level than the spot upon which I found myself. Returning to the surprise-party, we all moved cautiously forward toward the object which I had seen ; and when within a hundred yards of it, I once more left the men, and crawled forward, as before, to reconnoitre. As we had drawn nearer to this object, I had seen that I was mistaken as to this being the battery ; and I now made out that it was a block of two small stone buildings, evidently intended for use as a temporary barracks for the artillerymen belonging to the battery, and their officers.

I crept right up to the walls of these buildings, and finding everything perfectly dark and silent, pushed my investigations somewhat farther. Pulling off my boots, I passed right round both buildings ; and then found that I had in the first instance come upon their rear. Rounding a corner of the block (which was built in the form of the letter L with the points facing inwards) I at once became aware of the presence of two doors, one in each wing, both of which were open, and from which as well as from the windows, a feeble stream of light was issuing. From the position which I occupied, I was able to see in through the door of the smaller building ; and there, in a couple of hammocks, lay two figures partially undressed ; that is to say, they had thrown off their jackets, vests, and boots. The jackets and vests lay upon two chairs ; and from the quantity of gold lace upon these I rightly conjectured that they were the officers. I then ventured to take a look in through the window of the larger room, observing the precaution to stand far enough away in the first instance to prevent the light falling upon my face and so betraying my presence to any perchance wakeful artilleryman. All, however, was perfectly still and silent ; the long row of pallets on each side of the room might have been tenanted by so many corpses for all the movement that they made. A loud nasal chorus, however, prevented any apprehension I might otherwise have felt upon this subject. So far, so good. I now withdrew until I considered myself quite beyond the

influence of the lamps burning in the two apartments—and which, by-the-bye, I judged from the clearness with which they burned, must have been very recently trimmed—in order to ascertain the position of the battery. There it was, sure enough, within twenty yards of me ; and the only reason why I had not seen it before was because the barrack-buildings were interposed between it and me. I sank hastily down upon the grass to examine the structure, and made out that it was a sort of redan, the two faces of which, forming a very obtuse angle, were composed of stonework masked with sods. Five thirty-six-pounders grinned from the embrasures in each face, and alongside each gun was stacked up a goodly pile of shot. The merlons between the embrasures appeared to have been constructed in such a way as to form expense magazines, for I thought I could make out the doors leading thereto. The magazine proper I could not make out in the darkness, nor did I trouble to look for it. The battery, I ought to mention, was not enclosed at all in the rear, being evidently intended strictly as a sea-defence. I had been so busy noting all this that I had almost forgotten to look for the sentries which were sure to be posted somewhere. When I did at last make them out, I found, to my very great satisfaction, that there were only two of them, one at each wing of the battery ; and these, instead of pacing backward and forward as they ought to have done, were standing with their backs turned toward me, gazing out to seaward—if indeed they were not more than half asleep. I saw at once that the moment was eminently propitious ; so hurrying back to my men, who must have wondered what had become of me, I led them up to within ten yards of the barrack-buildings, when I made each man take off his shoes. We then crept up to the barrack-walls, and telling off nine men, each provided with a hammer carefully faced with leather to deaden the sound, and a few nails (being similarly provided myself), I placed the remainder of my party, five at each wing of the building, well within the shadow, with instructions to seize—without noise if possible—and detain any one who might emerge from the building. In the event of an alarm being given and the garrison aroused, two of the men were to rush in and overpower the officers, while the remainder were to rally round the door of the larger room and prevent a sally until a signal-whistle should inform them that the work of spiking was completed, when the whole were to give leg-bail and make for the beach. But I warned them to prevent a general alarm, if possible, at all hazards.

Having posted this division of my party, I rejoined the other. Each man was to spike a gun ; but the two on each wing were,

in addition, to creep up to and surprise the sentry on that wing ; and no one was to attempt anything until the word should be passed from each wing.

These arrangements made, we at once moved forward, noiseless as shadows, towards our respective points. I took the northern wing, while Bob Hawkins, a fine steady main-topman, took the other.

As soon as we began to move, I devoted my whole attention to the sentry on my own wing, knowing I could not attend to him and look after other matters also. There the man still stood, motionless as a statue ; but from a slight movement or two which he made, I soon saw that he was not asleep, but, on the contrary, wide awake. On we crept, and presently we were within six feet of him. At this moment one of our people sneezed violently, and the man instantly turned. My right-hand man and I sprang upon him on the instant, and while I wrenched his firelock out of his hand, my assistant grasped the unhappy man so tenaciously by the throat that he was utterly unable to utter a sound, and by sheer strength at the same time forced him down upon his knees. I laid the firelock carefully down upon the ground, and whipping out of my pocket a handful of oakum and some marline, stuffed it and a thowl-pin into the fellow's mouth, effectually gagging him, and, I fear, half-choking him at the same time. We next lashed him, neck and heels together, in such a way that he could not possibly move, and then set about spiking the guns, passing the word along at the same time.

A distinct clinking, notwithstanding the leather facing to the hammers, on the right wing told me that all was going favourably in that quarter, and in another minute the work was effectually done. I was extremely anxious during that minute, for the sound of the hammers smote upon my excited ear like the sharp strokes of a bell. It soon ceased, however, and as everything remained quiet at the barrack-buildings, it seemed that the clinking had not been loud enough to reach the ears of the sleepers therein. Giving the sentry on the right wing an overhaul to see that he, like his comrade was all safe, I immediately withdrew the spikers, and picking up the other party in our retreat we silently made the best of our way to the beach, which we safely reached in about a quarter of an hour, and, jumping into our boat, pulled cheerily out to seaward.

It had by this time grown just sufficiently light to enable us to see the frigate looming like a seventy-four about a mile to windward. They were evidently on the look-out for us on board her, for we had scarcely shoved the boat's nose clear of the point

before we saw the beautiful craft sweep gracefully round and run down toward us. She came as close in as the skipper dared bring her, and then hove-to. In ten minutes afterwards we were on board and the boat hoisted up.

"Well, Ralph," said Captain Annesley, as I went up the side and touched my hat. "what news?"

"We've carried out your orders to the letter, sir," I replied. "We have surprised the battery, and, without giving the slightest alarm to the French frigate, have spiked the ten thirty-six pounders which it mounts."

"Thirty-sixes, eh!" said he. "I thought they had the look of heavy metal when I saw them through the telescope yesterday. Why, at their elevation, and at so short a range, they would have sunk us before we could get out again, had we attempted to go in there without first silencing them. Thank you, Mr. Chester; you have performed a difficult and most important service with equal skill and courage, and I shall have great pleasure in representing as much to the admiral."

Here was a feather in my cap. However, I had no time just then for self-gratulation, for as soon as our success had been made known, the frigate wore round—every preparation had been made long before—and we headed at once for North-east Bay; our skipper having taken the utmost care to keep the French frigate shut in all night by the projecting point of land which forms the southern extremity of the bay, in order that the "*Astarte*" herself might be equally hidden from the French frigate.

Ten minutes afterwards we shaved close in round the point, and there lay the "*Artemise*," within half-a-dozen cables' lengths of us, with boarding-nettings triced up, guns run out, and everything apparently in readiness to receive us.

For a moment or two our presence appeared to be unnoticed; then *crack!* went the sentries' pieces, one after another, on board her, the quick, short roll of drums was heard beating to quarters, and the hitherto silent craft became in a moment all astir with bustle and animation.

In the meantime the "*Astarte*," conned by the skipper in person, with old Martin, the master, at the wheel, was put dead away before the wind until she had run in to within some five hundred yards of the beach and had barely eight feet of water between her keel and the bottom. The helm was then put gently over to port, and she swept round in a long graceful curve, during which the whole of her canvas was very smartly hauled down and clewed up, finally coming up head to wind, and gradually losing way, she ranged alongside

her antagonist—the distance having been most accurately measured by the skipper—and the grapplings were instantly thrown and secured.

The “*Artemise*” reserved her fire until we were fairly alongside, when she delivered her entire broadside, the tremendous concussion of which caused the two frigates to sway heavily away from each other until the strength of the grapplings and lashings was taxed to its fullest extent. The marines on her poop, at the same moment, opened upon us a heavy and galling musketry fire ; but by neither did we suffer much loss, for our maindeck ports were closed, the guns being run in, and the entire crew upon the upper deck crouching behind the lofty bulwarks. The moment that the first volley of musketry had rung out, away went both parties of boarders, fore and aft, making a way for themselves somehow, in spite of the nettings, and driving the Frenchmen from both ends of the ship into her waist, where they were so huddled and crowded together that very few of them were able to use their weapons to any advantage. They fought well for the first two or three minutes ; but when they found that the shore battery remained silent, they became confused and disheartened, as I easily gathered from their ejaculations and exclamations, and at length, after a really stubborn resistance of some ten minutes’ duration, they threw down their arms and surrendered.

The prisoners were at once sent below and the hatches clapped on over them, after which immediate steps were taken to remove the two ships from their somewhat perilous position, which was that of embayment upon a lee shore.

A strong prize-crew was placed on board the “*Artemise*,” leaving only just sufficient hands on board the “*Astarte*” to work her sails, and then the latter set her canvas, cast off her fasts and grapplings, and canted to the southward. So close to the shore had the French frigate been moored, and so completely within the shelter of the bight, that there was very little room for manœuvring, and the “*Astarte*,” short-handed as she was, narrowly escaped leaving bones to bleach on the rocky point. She managed, however, to scrape clear by the skin of her teeth, and once fairly outside and clear of danger she went about and hove-to on the starboard tack, to wait for her prize.

The “*Artemise*” had been placed in charge of Mr. Flinn, who had selected me for his first and Smellie for his second lieutenant ; Mr. Woods acting as first on board the “*Astarte*.” Mr. Vining, the third lieutenant, and Carter, were, it will be remembered, both absent in the prizes we had taken at the Roccas.

As soon as we saw that our own noble frigate was safe, Paddy—who never liked to lose anything—gave the order to pass the messenger and get the anchor, instead of cutting the cable. The ship was riding by her best bower, and I was rather doubtful whether we should manage the job. The men, however, walked her manfully up to her anchor, until the cable was straight up and down, when they left the capstan-bars and flew aloft to loose the canvas. Being as fully aware as their officers of the critical position of the ship, and of her liability to drive ashore unless the work were smartly executed, they achieved their task in an incredibly short time, and by almost superhuman exertions on their part the sails were set almost as quickly as though we had been fully manned.

“Well done, lads!” shouted Paddy encouragingly. “Now man the capstan-bars once more, break the anchor out at once, and run it straight up to the bows! If you cannot get it smartly all your labour will be lost by the ship driving ashore. Play up, piper, and walk away cheerily, men!”

The piper struck up some lively air—I forget what,—the seamen threw their whole weight upon the long capstan-bars, the cable strained and surged, the capstan jerked slowly round, pawl by pawl, and at length, as a heavier swell than usual rolled into the bay, there was a sudden and violent jerk, the capstan yielded somewhat unexpectedly to the violent exertions of the men, rolling two or three of them over on their noses, away went the rest at a run, laughing heartily at their comrades’ discomfiture, and the great anchor drew reluctantly out of the ground.

I was on the topgallant forecastle all the time, superintending the operations there, and as soon as I saw the cable swinging with the heave of the ship, “Anchor’s aweigh, sir!” I sang out.

“Thank you, Mr. Chester. Now put your helm hard-a-port, my man; over with it smartly. She has stern-way upon her and is driving in toward the shore. Now she pays off. Trim aft your lee headsheets, forward there. Man the lee forebraces. Now swing your foreyard, board the fore and main tacks, and haul aft the sheets. Any news of the anchor yet, Mr. Chester?”

“The stock has just hove in sight, sir!”

“That’s well, let us have it up, and get it catted at once, if you please.”

The frigate was now under weigh on the starboard tack and looking up handsomely to windward of the northern extremity of the bay, having been extricated from an exceedingly awkward position mainly by the extraordinary exertions of the crew. The

new skipper therefore deemed it an appropriate occasion upon which to raise the cry of "Grog ho !" and the men soon had an opportunity of comparing the quality of the Frenchmen's brandy with that of our own more unpretentious rum.

The French cook, meanwhile, had been summoned to the galley, and was soon busy preparing breakfast for the men, and concocting a ditto for the cabin, which was intended to show his own officers—who, by the way, had given their parole—that the love of his art rose triumphant above *la fortune de la guerre*, and to impress us with the conviction that it is a Frenchman only who can cook.

Captain Annesley, on seeing us fairly under weigh, filled and stood on upon the same tack as ourselves. At length we were far enough to windward to fetch clear of everything upon the other tack with ease, and we accordingly went about, the "Astarte" tacking at the same time. She edged down to within speaking distance of us shortly afterwards, and Captain Annesley hailed to say that—as we had fully expected—he intended to shape a course back to Barbadoes, and wished us to make every effort to keep together. After breakfast we had a little friendly trial of speed, when it was found that the "Astarte" could just spare us her fore and mizzen topgallant sails.

At two p.m. on the following day we both anchored in Carlisle Bay, and were very pleased to see that Vining and Carter were also safely there.

Our skipper got very great credit for this exploit of ours, as indeed we all did ; and I may as well here state that the participators in it eventually received the naval medal.

The "Artemise" was purchased into the British navy, under the same name, and the command of her given to Mr. Flinn. Mr. Woods was raised to the rank of first lieutenant, and Mr. Vining also moved a step up the ratlines, leaving a vacancy for a third lieutenant, which our skipper most kindly filled up by giving me an acting order.

As the "Astarte" had received a considerable amount of damage to her hull from the double-shotted broadside of the "Artemise," fired at such exceedingly close range, she was placed alongside the dockyard jetty for repairs, and it was not until next day that I had an opportunity to take a run ashore and make inquiries respecting little Fisher. The skipper and I went together, and, to our very great gratification, found that the poor boy, thanks to the assiduous nursing he had received, was doing marvellously well. His wounds were healing in the most satisfactory manner, and he had so far

recovered his strength that at the time of our visit he was daily expecting to receive the doctor's permission to sit up in bed for an hour or so. It was exceedingly doubtful, however, whether the poor lad would ever again have much use of his right arm, and in that case his prospects, as far as the navy was concerned at least, were at an end for ever.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE LOSS OF THE "JUANITA."



FORTNIGHT was very pleasantly spent by us at the island, during the progress of the repairs, the good people of Bridgetown vieing with each other in their efforts for our amusement, a ball also upon a very grand scale being given in our honour by the officers of the garrison ; and then all defects being made good, we once more put to sea.

We appeared by this time to have come to the end of our run of good luck, however ; for, though we most assiduously worked the entire archipelago, not a sign of an enemy could we find.

At length, the period of our cruise having expired, we bore up and returned to Port Royal, where Captain Annesley was received by the admiral with effusion.

The frigate remained at anchor in the harbour ten days, during which all hands indulged in a little welcome recreation, the officers attending quality balls, shooting, and visiting at various estates belonging to new-made, but most hospitable Kingstonian friends.

I had accepted an invitation from a Mr. Finnie—whose acquaintance I had made on my previous visit to Kingston—to spend a few days on his estate among the Blue Mountains and enjoy a little shooting on a small lake adjoining it ; and in my indefatigable pursuit of this amusement I managed to contract a severe attack of yellow fever.

I was most kindly and carefully nursed through it by Mrs. Finnie, and it was chiefly owing to her unceasing attention, under God, that I recovered at all. I was ill for weeks, what with the fever, a relapse, and the terrible prostration which followed ; and when at length I was able once more to crawl about, the "Astarte" had been long gone to sea upon a sort of roving commission, from which it was quite uncertain when she would return.

Under such circumstances the time soon began to hang heavily on my hands, and I longed for a sniff of the pure salt sea-breeze, once more. I was therefore greatly delighted when, on calling at the country house of the admiral—to whom I had been introduced by Captain Annesley—the following conversation occurred.

"Ah ! Chester," said the admiral, "glad to see you on your pins once more ; you have had a very narrow squeak of it, I hear."

"Indeed I have, sir," I replied. "So narrow was it that they had my coffin all ready built for me. I have managed to weather upon Yellow Jack this time, however, thank God ; and now, if I could only get to sea again, I believe I should soon pull round and completely recover my strength."

"Ah ! say you so ? It is quite likely." The old gentleman was silent for a few minutes, and then, turning abruptly to me, he said,—

"Have you heard that the 'Juanita'—that pirate brigantine which the 'Astarte' took among the Roccas—has been brought to Port Royal, and that we are putting a new foremast in her and converting her into a topsail schooner ?"

"No, sir, I have not," I replied. "Indeed I have heard *nothing* in connection with naval matters, for I have not yet been as far as Kingston."

"Umph ! Well, we *are* doing so," he said. "How do you think the change will affect her ?"

"I believe it will be a great improvement. All that heavy gear forward must, I am sure, have been detrimental to her sailing powers, especially in a sea-way."

"To be sure it was. Couldn't have been otherwise. Then you approve of the change ?"

"Yes, sir, certainly," I replied, wondering why on earth so great a personage should attach any importance to the opinion of a midshipman.

"Ah ! I am glad of that," returned the admiral ; "because, since you have expressed a wish to go to sea again, the idea has come into my head to give her to you—that is to say, until the 'Astarte' comes in again."

I murmured something—I hardly knew what—by way of thanks, to which the admiral kindly replied,—

"There, there ; don't say a word about it, my dear boy. Annesley has told me all about you, and if the half of what he says be true, I know of no one who is better fitted for the trust than yourself. Besides, I have really nobody else to place in charge. If you feel well enough, you had better run down on board in the course of a

day or two, and see how matters are going on. Now come away into the other room and have some lunch."

On the following morning, directly after breakfast, I started in Mr. Finnie's ketureen for Kingston, and, reaching the wharf about noon, chartered that fast-sailing clipper, the "Fly-by-night," to convey me to Port Royal. The jabber of the black boatmen and the exhilarating sensation of being once more afloat had quite a tonic effect upon my spirits, which rose higher and higher as we tore down past the Palisades, the boat careening gunwale-to, with the hissing, sparkling foam seething past and trailing away in a long wake astern.

When I got on board the "Juanita," I found that they had just stepped the foremast, and a most beautiful spar it was, without a knot in it, and as straight as a ray of light.

Fisher, the dockyard foreman, was on board, superintending operations, and from him I learned that it was intended to make some slight alterations in the armament of the craft ; for, whereas when captured she carried four long-sixes of a side, it was now proposed to alter the position of the ports, reducing their number to three, and bringing them more toward the middle or waist of the vessel, and mounting three long-nines on each side instead of the four sixes, thus removing the weight from the two ends, and adding three pounds to the weight of her broadside. It was also proposed to take away the long-nine from forward, and to substitute for it a long-eighteen between the masts.

These alterations accorded strictly with my own views upon the subject, and were precisely what I should have suggested, had I been asked. There had been some little talk about increasing the height of her bulwarks, but this, I was glad to hear, had been overruled ; for it would certainly have gone far toward spoiling her light, jaunty, graceful appearance.

It took the dockyard people just another week to complete the proposed alterations, during which I visited the craft every morning, returning to my quarters at Mr. Finnie's in time for their six o'clock dinner. On the day week after my first visit she was out of Fisher's hands, and as I left her late that afternoon I thought I had never seen a prettier little craft. Her tall, slim, taper spars had a jaunty little rake aft, and were encumbered with only so much rigging as was absolutely necessary to prevent them from going over the side. Her yards, though light, were of immense spread, and the new suit of sails with which she had been fitted fore and aft, and which had been stretching all the week and were permanently bent only that same morning, gleamed in the brilliant sunshine, white as snow.

Her hull was coppered to about six inches beyond the water-line, and above this she was painted a cool grey up to her rail, this colour being relieved by a narrow scarlet riband along the covering-board. It was a fancy of the admiral, that she should be made as unlike a ship of war as possible, in order that she might be the more thoroughly fitted for her destined work ; and, between us all, we certainly managed to meet his wishes in that respect to perfection, for she looked, both in hull and rigging, more like a yacht than anything else.

On the following day the stores and ammunition were shipped, and on the day after I called at the admiral's office for my instructions, joined the ship, and that same evening, as soon as the land breeze set in, proceeded to sea ; my orders being to cruise among the Windward Passages for the protection of trade and the suppression of piracy until recalled, and to look in at the post office on Crooked Island about once a month for orders.

Keeping close along in under the land, so as to take full advantage of the land breeze, we were off Morant Point by midnight, when we stretched away to seaward, and finally, after being obliged to take to our sweeps to get across the calm belt between the *terral* and the trade-wind, stood away to the northward, close-hauled upon the starboard tack, toward the Cuban shore.

Weathering in due time Cape Maysi, the eastern extremity of the island of Cuba, we shaped a course for Crooked Island Passage, and being then able to get a small pull upon the weather braces and to ease off the main sheet a foot or so, we bowled along in a style which filled all hands with delight.

On our arrival at Crooked Island we called at the post office, and I left a letter for the admiral, reporting progress. There was a fine full-rigged ship lying there when we arrived, bound for London ; she had been there two days, waiting and hoping for the arrival of a man-of-war, under the protection of which to get safely through the Passage. She carried a very rich cargo and some sixteen passengers, most of whom were ladies, and as she only mounted four small guns, and carried no more than just sufficient men to work the ship, her skipper was willing to lose a day or two upon the chance of getting a safe convoy clear of the islands, among which there had been of late some very daring cases of piracy.

Finding that the "Centurion"—as his ship was named—was perfectly ready for sea, I arranged with her skipper to sail again that afternoon, which we accordingly did. The "Centurion" proving to be a slow sailer, we were four days taking her out clear of everything, when, having done so without molestation, the two

ships parted company, and we bore up for a regular cruise to the southward among the various passages.

We fell in with a good many ships, all English, pushing through the various passages, and a few of them asked for convoy ; but of pirates, slavers, or French privateers—any of which would have been game for our bag—we saw nothing.

At length, having made the circuit of the archipelago once, calling at the post office on reaching it, but finding no orders, we had proceeded so far on our cruise as to have arrived off the Square Handkerchief Shoal on our second round, and were about to bear up through the Silver Kay Passage, when, toward the end of the afternoon watch, the wind suddenly dropped, and by sundown it had fallen stark calm.

The air turned close and hot as the breath of an oven, and as the evening wore on a heavy bank of black cloud worked up from to leeward and slowly overspread the sky, gradually settling down until the vapour appeared to touch our mastheads.

Hawsepipes, a master's mate, who was acting as master, had been very fidgety for some time, and at last, "What do you think all this means, Mr. Chester?" said he.

"I scarcely know *what* to make of it," I replied. "I have never seen anything quite like it before. It looks more like an impending thunder-storm than anything else ; but it *may* be something very different, and I was about to give the order to shorten sail when you spoke."

"I really think we had better," he returned. "I see no sign of wind as yet, certainly ; still, as we are in no hurry, it would be just as well to be prepared for anything and everything that can possibly happen. What sail shall we get her under?"

"Well, being, as you remark, in no sort of hurry, I think we will make our precautions as complete as possible by stowing everything except the fore-trysail and staysail. Let the men commence with the mainsail, as it is the largest and least manageable sail in a breeze."

"All hands, shorten sail !" sang out Hawsepipes.

The boatswain's pipe sounded, his gruff voice reiterated the order, and the men, who had been grouped together on the fore-castle discussing the singular appearance of the weather, sprang to their stations.

"Main and peak halliards let go ! Man the main-tack tricing-line and down with the throat of the sail ; round in upon the mainsheet ! Now, then, is there no one to attend to the peak downhaul ? That's right. Now roll up the sail snugly and put the coat on. In

with the whole of your square canvas forward. Royal, top-gallant, and topsail halliards and sheets let go ; man the clewlines, and clew them up cheerily, my lads. Haul down and stow both jibs. Lay aloft there ! and see that you stow your canvas snugly, although it is too dark at present for me to see what you are about." Thus Mr. Hawsepape, in as authoritative a tone as though he were the first luff of a 120-gun ship.

Sail was shortened in considerably less time than it has taken to write the above description ; for though this was the first cruise wherein Hawsepape had been placed in a position of actual authority, he was anything but a tyro in the science of seamanship, and insisted on *everything* on board being done as thoroughly well as it was possible to do it, and the schooner was soon ready for whatever might come.

The night grew hotter and hotter, and still the glassy calm continued. The darkness was so intense, so opaque, that on placing my hand close before my eyes, I was quite unable to see it ; and the stillness of the air was such that the flame of a lamp brought on deck burned straight up and down, merely swaying a trifle with the heave of the ship upon the long, sluggish swell.

This state of things continued until nearly four bells in the first watch, when a startling phenomenon occurred. The curtain of vapour grew more dense even than it had been before, entirely precluding the possibility of any light penetrating from above ; notwithstanding which, the atmosphere very gradually became luminous with a ghastly, blue, sulphurous light, until it was possible, not only to see distinctly every object on board the schooner, but also to distinguish the gleaming surface of the water for a distance on every side of some three miles or so.

The faces of the men huddled together on the fore-castle looked ghastly and death-like in this unearthly light, and the hull, spars, rigging and canvas of the schooner assumed such a weird and supernatural appearance when illumined by it, that she might easily have been mistaken for a cruiser from Phlegethon.

But this was not all. About half-an-hour after this singular luminosity of the atmosphere first became apparent, and before the startled seamen had recovered their self-possession, in an instant, without any premonition whatever, there appeared at each mast-head and yardarm, at the jibboom-end—in fact, at the end of every spar on board the schooner—a globe of greenish-coloured light, about the size of an ordinary lamp-globe, each of which wavered and swayed, elongated and flattened, as the ship gently rose and fell over the glassy sea.

The men were now thoroughly terrified.

"See that, Tom?" exclaimed one. "What d'ye call all them things?"

"Why, they be Davy Jones' lanterns, *they* be," returned Tom; "and right sorry am I to see 'em."

"Davy Jones' lanterns?" echoed the questioner. "What—you don't mean as them lights has been h'isted aboard here by the real old genuine Davy hisself, eh?"

"That's just what I *do* mean, then, and no mistake. My eyes! there's a show of 'em, too; never seed so many afore in my life. You mark my words, Dick, and see if something out o' the common don't happen to this here little barkie afore four-and-twenty hours is over our heads."

"What sort of a *somethin'* d'ye mean, Tom, bo'?" asked another.

"Why, harm or damage o' some kind," replied the oracle. "I've heerd say as how when them lanterns is showed aboard of a craft, that it's a sure sign as she's a doomed ship. I remembers one time when I was in the Chineese seas in the old—Lord ha' mercy on us! what's that?"

A dazzling, blinding flash, which seemed to set both sky and sea on fire, and a simultaneous crash of thunder of so terrific a character that my ears rang and tingled, and I was stone-deaf for a few minutes afterwards, interrupted the speaker. I reeled under the awful concussion, as though I had received a crushing blow, and for a minute or two I felt dazed to the verge of unconsciousness. Then I became sensible that Hawsepape was grasping my hand and trying to direct my attention forward; he seemed, too, to be anxious to say something, for his lips were moving rapidly in an excited manner.

I looked forward, and—behold!—there lay our foremast, with all attached, over the side; the stump—standing about four feet above the deck—being nothing but a mass of charred and blackened splinters. This was bad enough, but, letting my glance travel forward, I saw that the whole of the men on the forecastle had been struck to the deck by the electric fluid.

Hawsepape, the surgeon, the quarter-master, and I, all rushed forward in a body to the assistance of the unfortunate men, and to ascertain the extent of their injuries. We raised the poor fellows, as we came to them, into a sitting position against the bulwarks, while the surgeon hastily examined them. To our horror it was found that all but four had been killed by that tremendous discharge, the dead men's bodies being in some cases blackened and charred as if by fire; while, in other cases, their knives and the coin in their

pockets were fused into shapeless lumps of metal. The living were carried aft to the cabin, where the surgeon, assisted by Hawsepape, devoted all his energies to their restoration, while the quarter-master and I returned to the deck to look after the safety of the ship.

In the meantime a terrific thunderstorm heralded by that first destructive discharge, had set in, the green and baleful glare of the livid lightning illuminating the scene until it became almost as light as day ; while the crashing roll of the thunder was absolutely continuous, and so deafening that I felt stunned and stupefied by it. There was no rain, neither was there any wind, properly speaking, the dead calm being only interrupted now and then by a momentary gust of wind, hot as the blasting breath of a furnace, which passed over us and was gone almost before we had time to realize its presence. These fitful and transient gusts of wind came from all quarters of the compass. I had never before experienced weather of at all a similar character, nor had Simpson, the quarter-master, and we were equally puzzled as to what to expect. The heavens were black as ink, and the clouds, rendered visible by the unearthly bluish-green glare of the lightning, were seen to be writhing and working like tortured serpents ; but there was nothing to indicate a probable breeze.

There was plenty of work to be done, the clearing away of the wreck being our first task. Simpson and I accordingly armed ourselves with a tomahawk each, and went forward to make a commencement. Simpson began at the jibboom-end, cutting away the stays attached thereto, and working his way in, while I made an attack upon the shrouds and backstays. Our intention was to cut away everything in the first instance, in case of bad weather coming on, and afterwards to save as much of the wreck as we could.

I had scarcely begun my task when I fancied I smelt a smell of burning, but for the first minute or so I paid little attention to it, as the air had been for a long time pervaded by a strong choking sulphurous odour. I had struck but a few strokes with my tomahawk however, when a very strong whiff assailed my nostrils, and at the same instant a thin wreath of smoke appeared hovering over the fore-scuttle. Dropping my tomahawk, I darted toward the opening, and, looking down, found the place full of smoke, which appeared to be prevented from rising by the peculiar condition of the atmosphere.

"Lay in, Simpson," I shouted to the quarter-master ; "the ship is on fire !"

The old fellow, with his arm raised in the act of striking at the jib-stay, turned, and, catching sight of the smoke, bundled in-board in a trice. We descended to the fore-castle together, and found it so full of dense pungent smoke that it was impossible to remain there a moment without adopting precautions of some kind to escape suffocation; we accordingly returned to the deck, and, removing our black silk handkerchiefs from our throats saturated them with water, and then bound them tightly about the lower part of our faces, leaving our eyes only uncovered. Thus protected, we once more descended, and were then enabled to remain long enough to assure ourselves that the fore-castle was not the seat of the fire. As we returned to the deck up the steep ladder, I detected smoke issuing into the fore-castle in dense jets through the joints in the bulkhead, and this, together with the odour, which at that moment became very strong, led me to suspect that the fire was located in the store-room.

Saturating our handkerchiefs afresh and readjusting them upon our faces, we rushed aft and descended the main hatchway. Here—that is to say, immediately in the wake of the hatchway—there was very little smoke, but with every step forward it became more and more dense, and as we approached the store-room the heat and smoke became so stifling that we could only proceed with the utmost difficulty.

At length, however, we managed to reach the store-room door, and then the heat, the heavy smoke, the dull roar and crackling of the flames, gave us unmistakable assurance that we had found the seat of the mischief. I placed my hand upon the thick planking of the bulkhead and found it to be scorching hot.

We were unable to remain a moment where we were, so intense was the smoke and heat. We accordingly returned to the deck and summoned Hawsepiper and the doctor to our assistance. We informed them in a few words of this new catastrophe, or rather of the unexpected result of the original one—for I had no doubt whatever that it was the lightning which had set the ship on fire,—and received from them in return the news that the four men had been restored to consciousness, but had not yet recovered the use of their limbs; we then at once set about cutting a hole through the deck into the store-room, hoping that by means of the fire-engine and hose we might yet be able to conquer the flames.

A hole was first cut in the deck large enough to admit the end of the hose; the hose was then inserted, and packed carefully round with wet canvas where it passed through the deck, so as to prevent, as far as possible, the access of fresh air to the fire, and we four

then manned the engine and proceeded with all our energy to pump water down upon the flames.

We had been thus engaged for about a quarter of an hour, the lightning raging round us all the while in undiminished fury, when, in an instant, down came the rain in a perfect flood.

"Shut the ports!" yelled Hawsepape.

We understood in a moment the object he had in view, and, leaving the engine, went round the decks, closing the ports and stopping up the scuppers with pieces of canvas, so as to prevent the water from flowing off the deck. The rain was descending in such copious torrents that in a few minutes we were up to our knees in warm, fresh water, when the hose was withdrawn from the hole in the deck and the water allowed to stream down into the store-room. A dense jet of steam rushed up through the hole immediately that we withdrew the hose and its packing.

We now had a moment in which to take a look below, and see what result had attended our labours. A glance at the fore-scuttle was anything but reassuring, dense clouds of steam and smoke issuing by this time from the opening, and as we looked the smoke suddenly became tinged with the lurid reflection of flames. I darted to the opening, and looking down as well as I could through the blinding suffocating clouds which rushed up in denser volumes every instant, saw that the bulkhead was burned through, and the flames already spreading in every direction.

The fire-engine was instantly started once more, the hose being this time directed down into the fore-castle, and for twenty minutes we played upon the fire there—the rain all the while rushing down in sheets and fast filling our decks—without result; at the end of that time it became apparent that the ship was doomed.

Hawsepape and the doctor had meanwhile pressed their investigations farther aft, soon reappearing with the alarming news that the fire was spreading aft with great rapidity.

"Then there is nothing for it but to take to the boat without further delay," said I.

And we set about getting her over the side forthwith, our motions being considerably accelerated by the increasing loudness of the roaring crackling sound of the fire, the dense cloud of smoke which now enveloped the ship, and the almost unbearable heat of the deck. The flames spread so rapidly that by the time we had got the boat into the water, with her oars, sails, &c., a couple of breakers of water, a bag or two of biscuits, and a miscellaneous collection of small stores from the cabin lockers, the heat and smoke had become so unendurable that we could not remain still a moment, indeed so

sorely pressed were we that the poor fellows who had been injured by the lightning, and who had been brought on deck some time before to save them from suffocation, were almost *thrown* over the side into the boat; we scrambled in after them, and casting off got out the oars, and pulled as fast as we could from the ship, which in another minute was blazing from stem to stern, notwithstanding the still pouring rain.

We pushed off in dead silence, and, having pulled far enough away to be clear of the scorching heat, laid with one consent upon our oars to watch the conflagration. We had been lying thus motionless upon the water some three or four minutes, when the mainmast swayed slowly to and fro for a moment, and then fell with a hissing splash into the water alongside, a shower of sparks shooting up at the same moment from the burning bulwarks which had been crushed out by the mast in its fall. We were watching and remarking upon the way in which the planks of the topsides were twisting up and opening out from the timbers under the influence of the tremendous heat, when suddenly an awful recollection flashed upon me.

“Pull! pull for your lives!” I screamed. “We have forgotten to drown out the magazine.”

Not another word was needed. With one accord the oars dashed into the water, and you may rest assured that we threw our entire weight and strength into each stroke, bending the stout ash staves as though they were pliant whalebone, and all but lifting the boat clear out of the water.

We had not pulled more than a dozen strokes before there was a violent concussion, as though we had run stem-on upon a sandbank, the schooner's sides burst apart, the flaming planks of the deck, with its fittings, the guns, and everything else upon it, soared into the air in the midst of a blinding sheet of flame, and then came the dull, heavy roar of the explosion, and—black darkness.

We ceased pulling as the explosion took place, struck powerless for the moment at this sudden and terrible destruction which had befallen the craft so lately our home and ark of safety, and it was only when the fiery fragments began to fall thickly round us that we took to our oars once more.

But our troubles had scarcely yet begun, for our oars had hardly dipped in the water when—*crash!*—there fell a ponderous fragment of one of the schooner's timbers down upon the boat, literally cutting her in two and killing poor old Simpson on the spot.

The boat at once sank from under us, leaving us all struggling for our lives in the water. Hawsepipes was a famous swimmer, and

he immediately seized the doctor—who could not swim a stroke—and placed him in a position of temporary safety upon the floating piece of timber which had inflicted upon us this fresh disaster, while I looked after the injured men who, probably owing to the shock of immersion, had suddenly so far recovered the use of their limbs as to be able with very little assistance to gain the same refuge.

We now found, what we had been too busy to notice before, that the thunder-storm had nearly worn itself out ; an occasional flash, low down upon the horizon, and its long, rumbling accompaniment of distant thunder being all that remained to remind us of it, except the frequent gleam of sheet lightning which continued to play all round the horizon and behind the great banks of cloud into which the black canopy overhead had now broken.

The question calling for immediate attention was, how best to provide for our safety. Clinging to the floating timber we were safe only as long as it remained calm ; a very gentle sea would be sufficient to wash us from our hold. Looking round me, I perceived that we were at no great distance from the wreck of the foremast, and I thought if all hands could only reach it, we might be able to construct from it and the spars attached to it a raft of sufficient capacity to accommodate us all in some degree of comfort and safety. I mentioned my idea to Hawsepape, who approved of it greatly ; whereupon I left him to look after the survivors while I went to the spar. Reaching it, I was able without much difficulty to form from the halliards of the various sails and the other running-gear still attached to the spars a warp long enough to reach from the foremast to the timber to which the others were clinging, with which I swam back. Bending the end of this warp securely to the piece of timber, Hawsepape and I then swam to the foremast, and hauling upon the warp, soon had the rest of the party there also.

Hawsepape undertaking with the assistance of the others to cut the yards adrift and separate the topmast from the lowermast, I took another cruise with the warp, and was fortunate enough, after swimming about for over an hour, to bag a half-burned hencoop with four dead fowls still therein, three hatches, and the remains of the mainmast with topmast attached, the latter spar being still in good enough condition to be serviceable, and the jibboom. All these things I contrived to get alongside the foremast without interrupting the labours of the others.

Hawsepape evidently knew how to construct a raft upon scientific principles. The foremast he took for a sort of foundation or keel, laying the two topmasts, one on each side and parallel to it, at a

distance of about ten feet. The ends of these spars were then crossed by and lashed to the two yardarms of the foreyard at the end of the raft which he intended for its stern, and to the topsail yardarms at the fore end. This formed a rectangular staging, with the lowermast running fore and aft through its centre. This staging was then strengthened by lashing the jibboom across it in the middle, and upon the top of all, the hatches and the hencoop were firmly secured, forming a small platform, upon which, however, there was room for us all with a little crowding. The topgallant yard with the sail still attached was then got on end, one arm being lashed to the foremast, and the other sustained aloft by means of shrouds and stays. The topgallant sail we cut in two diagonally, and thus treated it formed a tolerably serviceable leg-of-mutton sail.

It took us so long to do all this, that by the time we had finished, day was breaking ; and as the sun rose the clouds cleared away, and the trade-wind once more resumed its sway, the fresh, cool breeze greatly reviving our exhausted energies, while it bore us, at the rate of about a knot and a half per hour, away from the scene of the catastrophe.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A VOYAGE UPON A RAFT.

WE had now time to look about us, and to realize our position, which—though it might easily have been worse—was certainly the reverse of enviable.

In the first place we were upon a frail raft which, well constructed though it was, could not be expected to hold long together, unless we were favoured with exceptionally fine weather. In the next place everything of which we were possessed in the shape of provisions was comprised in the four dead fowls found in the hen-coop ; and of water, or any other liquid with which to quench our thirst, we had not a single drop. On the other hand the island of St. Domingo was under our lee, at a distance of about ninety miles, and if our raft would only hold together so long and maintain the speed at which it was then travelling, we might hope to reach land in from two and a half to three days.

I laid these facts before my companions, directing their special attention to the circumstance that we had to look forward to three days of suffering from thirst, and also from hunger in a minor degree, urging them to the brave endurance of these privations, if necessary, and pointing out to them that though unfortunately we happened to be in one of the least-frequented of the passages, there was a chance, although a somewhat slender one, of our being picked up at any hour, and I wound up by reminding them that, even on that frail raft, we were as much under the protection of Him who holds the waters in the hollow of His hand as we should be were we safe on shore. At the doctor's suggestion we then all knelt down, while he offered up a brief but earnest prayer for our deliverance. We all felt much more hopeful after this short religious exercise, and went cheerfully about our work of examining the raft, now that we had daylight with us once more, with the object of ascertaining whether it was possible to make any improvement in it or not. The examination, careful and minute though it

was, was soon over, and we came to the conclusion that no improvement was possible with the materials at hand, and that, if the lashings did not give way and the weather continued fine, we had not much to fear.

Hawsepape had rigged steering-gear to the raft by lashing a piece of deck-plank, some twelve feet long, to the schooner's foremast in such a way that half of it was immersed in the water and acted as a rudder, while the other half slanted in over the raft and served as a tiller; it was, in fact, a rude substitute for a steering-oar. This answered its purpose perfectly, in so far as that it enabled us to keep the raft dead before the wind; but when I tried the experiment of edging a couple of points or so to the southward of the direction in which the wind blew, with the view of reaching the St. Domingo shore as quickly as possible, I found that the speed of the raft lessened sensibly, and that she began to drive slightly sideways through the water—she would not, in short, travel in any direction except dead before the wind, and we were therefore compelled to rest content with that, and to devote all our energies to the most careful steering, so as to run straight to leeward and so get the greatest possible speed out of her.

We steered in spells of two hours each, the rest seeking shelter from the sun's rays in the shadow of the sail, the seamen trying to pass away the time as much as possible in sleep. As the morning wore on, the heat became very great and our thirst grew with it, but we managed to stave off its worst pangs by pouring sea-water plentifully over each other, as we sat in our clothes. About noon we thought of dinner, but, hungry as we by that time were, we scarcely fancied our fare, which was one of the dead fowls, to be eaten raw of course, since we had no means of cooking it. Finding that the rest were equally as squeamish as myself in this respect, I suggested and it was agreed that the fowls should remain untouched until we felt hungry enough to eat the uncooked flesh with a relish.

Toward sundown we had a most unwelcome addition to our company, in the shape of three sharks, which suddenly made their appearance close under the stern of the raft, maintaining their position, at about three yards distance, with a perseverance which was worthy of a better cause. The size of their dorsal fins, which were carried well out of the water, assured us that our followers were sharks of the largest size, and enabled us to form a pretty fair idea of what would be our fate should any of us be unfortunate enough to fall or be washed off the raft.

A keen look-out was maintained during the whole of that day, but no sail was seen, and at length the sun went down in a cloud-

less sky, giving us an assurance of the continuance of fine weather.

I anxiously marked the position of the luminary when he reached the horizon, and saw, with a heart-sick feeling which I cannot describe, that we were—and had probably been all day—sailing a course about W.S.W., or two points more to the northward than I had hoped. This was a most serious matter, since it would throw us much farther to the westward, and necessitate our going a much greater distance, probably nearly double, before we could possibly reach land ; and I began, for the first time, to fear that we might possibly miss St. Domingo altogether. And I knew that if we did that we might give ourselves up for lost, as I could not entertain much hope of our being able to hold out until we should reach the Windward Channel, and even if we did, we might still fail to fall in with a ship to pick us up, in which case we should have to go on to Jamaica, which we could scarcely reach, under the most favourable circumstances, in less than a fortnight. These disquieting thoughts, however, I deemed it prudent to confine to my own breast.

About midnight my worst apprehensions as to the course of the raft were confirmed by the discovery of breakers ahead, which I knew, from the position of the "Juanita" on the previous night, could indicate nothing else than that we were running down upon the Square Handkerchief Shoal, of which I had hoped to pass clear to the southward.

We gave the raft as much starboard helm as she would take, and after a long and most anxious time succeeded in just scraping clear of the breakers, which we found were occasioned by an extensive group of rocks just awash. The sight of these rocks enabled me to identify our position, as I recognized in them the rocks which occupy the north-east corner of the shoal. We were therefore passing as nearly as possible directly across the middle of the shoal, instead of going to the southward of it, as I had hoped.

Meanwhile the pangs of hunger and thirst were steadily intensifying with us. Our tongues grew dry and hard, and the doctor's lips began to crack, while the men could talk of nothing but the clear, gurgling brooks and sparkling cascades by the side of which they had stood in other days.

The wind had freshened somewhat during the night, and toward sunrise a few clouds worked up to windward, the sight of which induced us for a time to hope that we might be blessed with a shower. But they passed over without dropping any of their longed-

for moisture upon us, and the sun once more rose up in unclouded splendour to torture us with his scorching rays.

Our repugnance to raw fowl had by this time entirely passed away, and although upon examination our poultry turned out to be rather high, one of the defunct chickens was torn asunder, and, being divided among us with the most scrupulous fairness, was devoured in an incredibly short time.

"Ah!" exclaimed one of the men, as the last morsel of his allowance disappeared down his throat. "That's the most tasty snack as I've ate for many a long day. It's a pity there ain't more of it. But there, I s'pose it won't do to eat up all our wittals to oncet; let's be thankful as we've had even that small mossel. I say, mates, don't you find these here fowl-bones very sweet picking?"

"Uncommon," answered another. "There's a sort of a peculiar flavour with 'em that I don't disremember to have tasted with fowl-bones when I've had 'em for breakfast afore."

There was unquestionably "a sort of a peculiar flavour" with *my* share, but I should scarcely have referred to it with such gusto as they did, I thought.

"Now if I could only have washed my breakfast down with a pannikin of grog," remarked a third, "I should ha' said as I'd thoroughly enj'yed it."

"Grog!" exclaimed the first speaker. "Grog be blowed! Whenever I've a glass of grog I always wants another on top of it, and so I should to-day. I'd give all the grog as ever was brewed for one good long swig at the spring which bubbles out from under the rocks behind my poor old mother's house on Dartmoor. That *is* sweet water, if you like, mates."

"'Tain't sweeter, I know, than the water of the trout-stream in which I used to fish with a bit of twine bent on to a crooked pin, when I was a boy," remarked another. "Many's the time as I've gone down on my hands and knees upon a rock or a little bit of a shingly bar, when I've been hot and thirsty—as it might be now—and drunk and drunk until I could drink no more. My eyes! mates, but they *was* drinks, and no mistake."

And so they rambled on, their dry lips smacking with every fresh reminiscence.

I knew that this sort of conversation would do more harm than good by intensifying the feeling of burning thirst from which they were suffering, so I cut it short by remarking,—

"By the way, lads, speaking of fishing, cannot one or another of you work up one of the nails out of those hatches into a fish-hook with your knives? The others meanwhile might get some threads

out of that piece of spare canvas which we cut off the topgallant sail, and twist it up into a fishing-line."

No sooner said than done. The poor fellows were glad of something to employ their minds and fingers upon, and went to work with avidity to carry out the suggestion.

By sunset an ordinary three-inch nail had been hammered and bent and scraped down to a very respectable substitute for a hook ; while the other three seamen had each contrived to spin up about five fathoms of good strong line. Neither hook nor line, however, was ever used.

The breeze again freshened during the night, driving the raft along about two knots in the hour ; and again uprose the sun in a cloudless sky.

We divided another of the dead fowls between us, but on this morning there was none of the cheerful chat which had accompanied the previous meal. The repulsive food was devoured in silence, due probably in part to the absence of any hopeful topic of conversation, and also, doubtless, to a great extent in consequence of the dry, sore, swollen sensation in the men's throats. For my own part my throat was in such a state that it was with the utmost difficulty I succeeded in swallowing my own allowance.

Hawsepipes, the doctor, and I struck up as lively a conversation as we could, touching the probability of our soon being picked up, and I embraced the opportunity of mentioning casually that in consequence of the great amount of easting in the wind I feared we should not reach land quite as soon as I had at first anticipated. I was almost sorry immediately afterwards that I had mentioned it, when I saw the despairing look which came into the faces of my fellow-sufferers, and the yearning glances upward at the pitiless sky, which showed not the faintest fleece of cloud—not the remotest promise of a single drop of pure, fresh water wherewith to moisten our parched and baked tongues and throats. The thirst-agony now began to paint its effects upon us more and more palpably every hour ; our lips being dry, black, and gashed with deep cracks ; while our tongues were dry and swollen until they seemed too large for our mouths. The skin upon the faces of my companions was burnt, parched, and shrivelled by the sun, seamed in every direction by cracks, and peeling off in many places ; while their eyes glowed and sparkled like coals of fire with the fierce fever which consumed them. The sharks which had stuck to us with such frightful and ominous pertinacity had their number augmented this day by the arrival of three new-comers.

"Six of 'em," muttered the seaman who was steering the raft

when the three new arrivals appeared ; “ that means as six out of us seven is doomed.”

Another endless day of indescribable agony—another long night of torment ; and again up rose the sun in a pitiless, cloudless sky.

Oh ! how fervently I longed and prayed for an overcast sky and a pelting rain, even though it were accompanied by the wildest hurricane which ever blew ; the worst that could happen to us in such a case would be drowning, the prospect of which seemed to be bliss itself compared with this slow fiery torment of thirst.

On this day Tom Miles and Ned Rodgers, two of the four seamen, suddenly sprang to their feet, and with a despairing yell plunged over the side of the raft into the sea before we were aware of or could arrest their terrible intention. There was a frightful splashing in the water astern, as the sea-monsters fought over their prey ; then all was quiet again. *Two of the sharks had disappeared.*

My companions regarded this terrible tragedy almost with indifference, and the doctor, in a weak and cracked voice which was scarcely audible, muttered something to the effect that “ those two were happily out of their suffering.” Before sunset the poor fellow had followed them, and *another shark had disappeared.*

Some time during the night I was awakened by Hawsepape, whose trick at the helm it was. He aroused me by giving me a feeble shake on the shoulder, and, being by this time unable to speak, raised his hand and pointed skyward. I looked up and saw that the firmament was obscured by heavy masses of cloud, which held out the promise of a speedy fall of thrice-blessed rain. I scrambled to my feet and hastened to arouse the two seamen, in order that we might take immediate measures to secure as much as possible of the priceless liquid. One of the poor fellows was in such a weak and exhausted condition that he was unable to rise ; the other contrived to do so with the utmost difficulty, and we lowered down the sail, mast and all, so as to form with the canvas a receptacle for the expected blessing.

At length it came in a sudden squall of wind, with a few flashes of lightning, and for two or three minutes it poured down almost as heavily as it did on that night—oh ! how many ages ago it seemed now—when the “ Juanita ” was destroyed. We gathered round the sail and drank greedily, recklessly, of the heaven-sent nectar ; filled our hats and boots—our only receptacles—with it, and then drank and drank again as long as a drop remained in the sail. And oh ! how we grudged the precious drops which poured in a stream through the thin canvas !

To describe the reviving effect which this delicious draught had

upon our exhausted frames is impossible ; our strength and our voices returned to us like magic, our spirits revived, and we felt like new creatures. We rehoisted the mast and sail into its place with comparative ease, and then, with one accord, knelt down and offered our sincere and heart-felt thanks for the mercy which had been shown us in our extremity ; while the raft swept cheerily away before the rising blast at almost double her usual speed.

On the following day we were again favoured with an example of the ease with which the Almighty can supply the wants of His creatures, even in such a situation as ours ; for during the forenoon a shoal of flying-fish rose out of the water alongside, and passed directly over the raft, nearly a score being intercepted in their flight by our sail, and caught before they were able to flop off into the water again. I thought that any attempt to preserve them would be sure to end in failure by their quickly becoming unfit for human food, and therefore proposed that they should be at once eaten, which proposition, I need scarcely say, met with the cordial approval of my companions, and was immediately carried out. We took with them the remainder of the water which we had caught and preserved in our hats and boots, but found, to our consternation, that a great deal of it had leaked away, and the little that remained had become strongly brackish from the quantity of spray which had flown over us and mingled with it since the freshening of the breeze.

The wind remained fresh all that day and rose still higher during the following night, so that our speed gradually increased from a knot and a half to nearly four knots. The sea rose also in proportion, and this caused the raft to work to such an extent that I began to entertain serious fears as to whether it would hold together much longer. Most of the lashings had worked quite loose ; but there were now only three of us, and our united strength was wholly inadequate to the tightening of them until the sea should go down.

Another night passed, another day, and no more rain had fallen ; and then our sufferings returned—as it seemed to us—with tenfold intensity. Our strength went from us like water from a sieve ; and when night once more closed down upon our tortured frames we abandoned ourselves, with one accord, to despair ; the helm was left to itself, and the raft was allowed to steer herself as best she might. We sank down upon the hatches which formed our deck, and sought to evade in our slumbers some small portion of our horrible torments. As far as I was concerned, however, the effort was in vain ; for the moment that sleep stole upon my exhausted frame visions of lakes and springs, murmuring brooks and sparkling

fountains of cool, delicious, fresh water arose before me, and I suffered all the agonies of the mythical Tantalus.

At length I could endure the torment of dreaming no more, and started to my feet, went to the helm, and got the raft once more before the wind. I had scarcely done so and turned my glances astern for a moment, when,

“A sail! A sail!!” I screamed.

My two companions started to their feet and hurried to my side, eagerly questioning me as to her whereabouts. I pointed her out to them. There she was, about three miles directly astern, clearly visible in the light of the young moon, which gleamed faintly upon her canvas; but—oh, misery—she was close-hauled upon the starboard tack, dead to windward, *and sailing away from us*. We shouted until not another sound would our parched throats utter, but it was all of course of no avail; and we were far too low in the water to attract the attention of even the sharpest look-out in that feeble light; the ship swept steadily on and at length passed out of sight below the horizon.

Then, as we sank down again in utter abandonment, how bitterly we reproached ourselves and each other for not maintaining a look-out! Had we done so, we should assuredly have made her out while still to windward of her, and could have lowered our sail until she had approached near enough to enable us to run down upon her. However, it was too late now to remind each other of that; the mischief was done; and the only thing that remained was to take care that there should be no recurrence of it.

But I will dwell no longer upon the details of those endless days and interminable nights of indescribable torture. Suffice it to say that I endured two more days and nights of suffering, during which I was only dimly cognisant of my surroundings; all my faculties were engaged in the task of wrestling with and assisting my tortured frame to bear up against the terrible anguish which consumed me; at the end of that time exhausted nature could bear no more, and relief at length came with unconsciousness.

CHAPTER XXIX.

FAREWELL.



WHEN at length I recovered my senses, I found myself in bed, in a small, light, airy room lighted by a couple of windows, the jalousies of which were so adjusted as to admit all the air possible, while at the same time the direct rays of the sun were excluded.

The bed upon which I was lying was a tolerably roomy affair for one person, and the linen, though somewhat plain in quality, was fresh and scrupulously clean. The only other furniture in the room was a small table, well stocked with medicine-phials, &c., and a couple of chairs, upon one of which—the one which stood next the head of the bed—sat a man in a white flannel shell-jacket and blue military trousers with a stripe of yellow braid down the seams.

The room in which I found myself was evidently, from the size and position of the windows—one in the wall at the foot of the bed, and the other in the wall on my left—a corner room in some tolerably extensive building. Looking out between the lattices of the jalousies, which were adjusted in such a way that I was able to see distinctly the various objects outside, I perceived that the building was situated in the midst of a park or grove of magnificent cotton, kennip, and other trees, the branches of which were swaying and the leaves rustling cheerily in the strong sea-breeze which rushed through them. The sunlight flashed brilliantly upon the swaying foliage, and gleamed upon the plumage of the bright-winged birds and gaudy butterflies which flitted restlessly from tree to tree; while the long, luxuriant grass in the distance—where I could see it—bowed and undulated beneath the strong breeze like a billowy sea; the background of clear, pure, blue sky beyond completing a picture, the joyous freshness of which seemed almost heavenly to me in my extreme weakness. The air, too, was full of the chirping of millions of insects and lizards, the lowing of distant cattle, the bleat of sheep, the rifle-like crack of waggon-drivers' whips, the

voices and laughter of men close beneath my window, and a multitude of other joyous sounds.

I lay for a long time drinking in with silent ecstasy these glorious sights and sounds which fell so soothingly upon my senses, quite forgetful of self and my past suffering, and utterly indifferent to everything but the sensuous pleasure of the moment. Indeed my poor head felt so light and weak that I seemed almost incapable of the exertion of thought.

At length I turned my head toward the man in the chair by my bedside. He had a book in his hand, and his body was turned somewhat from me in order that the light might fall more fully upon the pages.

"Where am I?" I murmured.

The man turned quickly, and rising laid his book upon the chair, face downward, while he bent over me.

"How do you find yourself now, sir?" he asked.

"I don't know," I replied, scarcely realizing the meaning of my own words. "Is there anything the matter?"

"You've been very ill, sir, for a long time; but you seem a great deal better this morning. If you'll excuse me for a minute, sir, I'll send for the doctor."

The man quietly left the room, was absent for a minute or two, and then as quietly returned.

"Where am I?" I again inquired.

"You're in the military hospital at Up-park camp, sir," he replied. "But if you'll excuse me, I think you'd better not talk much just yet; the doctor will be here directly, and he'll tell you all you want to know."

Some twenty minutes elapsed, and then the door once more opened, admitting a rather tall handsome man dressed entirely in white nankeen, with white canvas shoes on his feet.

He came up to the side of the bed, and, before saying a word, put his cool fingers upon my pulse. He then laid his hand upon my forehead for a minute or two and upon the top of my head.

"Well, Mr. Chester," said he, "how do you feel? You are very much better this morning, are you not?"

"I really don't know," I answered. "I don't feel as though there is much the matter with me beyond weakness; my hands seem as though they were chained down to the bed, and I have very little feeling in my limbs; but beyond that I don't think there is very much wrong. I suppose I have been ill, though. What has been the matter with me?"

"Oh! quite a complication of disorders," he returned lightly;

“brain fever among other things. Have you no recollection of falling ill?”

“None whatever,” I said. “Stay, though—was it not something to do with a thunder-storm and—um—*what* was it?”

“There, there ; never mind now ; it is all over and done with. Don’t try to recall the circumstances just now ; your brain is still too weak to be much exercised ; it will all come back in good time, never fear. Do you feel at all sleepy ?”

“Not so much sleepy as hungry,” I replied. “I feel as though I had not yet had my breakfast.”

“Neither have you,” he returned with a laugh. “The fact is you were not awake at breakfast-time, and Atkins here had strict orders not to disturb you. However, it is not yet too late ; I daresay we shall be able to find something for you. I will see to it myself ; and when you have taken your breakfast, just try to get to sleep again. Sleep will now do you as much good as either food or medicine.”

He then retired to the far end of the room, Atkins accompanying him ; and after whispering to his subordinate for a minute, he turned, nodded encouragingly to me, and retired.

When he was gone I endeavoured to get a little information out of Atkins, the attendant, but he briefly informed me that his orders not to talk to me were imperative, and begged that I would not ask him to transgress them.

In a short time a basin of some kind of light broth, with a little bread crumbled into it, made its appearance, the whole of which I demolished, and soon afterwards fell into a sound sleep.

I awoke again toward evening ; was again visited by the doctor, and once more partook of a tolerably substantial basin of broth and bread. Just as the light was fading away, Atkins approached my bedside with something in a wine-glass which he invited me to swallow. I drank it off, made a wry face at its decidedly nauseous flavour, and soon afterwards fell asleep.

The next day passed in a very similar manner, except that I remained awake longer during the day, and as I lay there enjoying the cool freshness of the breeze and looking out through the jalousies, the recollection of the events which attended and followed the destruction of the “Juanita” returned to my memory.

From this time my progress toward recovery was rapid, and at the end of a week I was allowed to sit up, partially dressed, for an hour or two during the day.

When I had reached this stage I was deemed strong enough to learn the full particulars of my illness ; and I was horrified to find

that I had been for nearly eight months completely out of my mind. It seemed that the raft had drifted before the wind until—missing St. Domingo altogether—it had reached the Windward Channel, where it was fallen in with by the “Rattler” sloop-of-war; the skipper of which picked us up, and finding that we were still alive took the greatest care of us, cracking on until he reached Port Royal. Hawsepiper and the seaman had sufficiently recovered by that time to be able to narrate all the circumstances connected with the loss of the schooner; but I was delirious with brain-fever, and the admiral—who was inexpressibly shocked at the recital of our sufferings—immediately made arrangements for my removal to the camp-hospital, that being deemed the spot where I should be most likely to recover. I had been nursed and attended there with the utmost assiduity, and the brain-fever eventually left me; but it left me insane, in which dreadful condition I had remained for nearly eight months. The brain-fever and the insanity were both attributed—rightly, no doubt—to my frightful sufferings; and no effort had been spared to secure the restoration of my reason, which, by God’s mercy, had at length been achieved. I learned, further, that the “Astarte” was still upon the station, but was then at sea, having sailed upon another cruise a few days only before my recovery. Captain Annesley had suffered greatly in mind through the long continuance of my affliction, and had spent hours by my side whenever the frigate happened to be in port, and had directed that no expense should be spared in the endeavour to secure my restoration to sanity.

As soon as I was strong enough to be moved, I was placed in a grass hammock slung between two poles, and in that easy and agreeable mode of travelling was conveyed by negroes—who bore me four at a time, while another shaded me from the sun’s rays with a huge umbrella—to Mr. Finnie’s country house; that most hospitable planter and his wife having insisted upon undertaking the task of once more nursing me back to health and strength.

I remained with these kind-hearted friends over a month, and in that time managed to recover to a very great extent all that I had lost; but my head still remained unpleasantly weak; so that I could neither read nor write for more than half-an-hour a day. Doctor Musgrave, the head physician, who had looked after me during my long sojourn in the camp-hospital, and who still rode out to see me whenever he could spare the time—which, however, was not often—at length forbade me to touch either pen or book for at least six months, assuring me that my complete recovery depended entirely upon my scrupulous compliance with his injunctions, and

very frequently and strongly urged upon me the desirability of my returning to England and retiring from the sea for a time. At length, seeing no other prospect of perfect restoration, I consented, and began leisurely to make my preparations for departure by the next packet.

A few days after I had made up my mind upon this point, a ketureen rattled up to the front door of the house, and in another moment Captain Annesley rushed headlong and unannounced into the room in which I was seated chatting with my kind and gentle hostess, and seizing my hand began to shake it as though he would shake it off.

“Ralph, old man,” he ejaculated excitedly, “*how* are you? Stand up, man, and let me look at you. Ah! there you are; but—you are as thin as a rake, and still rather shaky, apparently. My *dear* madam, *pray* excuse me; upon my honour I never perceived you until this moment. I trust you are well, and your esteemed husband, also. Thank God, old fellow, I see you something like your old self once more.”

The skipper rattled on until he was fairly out of breath, and then gradually subsided into his usual quiet and self-possessed manner. The “Astarte,” he told me, had arrived the previous day, and he had seized the first available moment to run out and see me, the admiral having acquainted him with the news of my recovery and removal. At the earnest invitation of my host and hostess he consented to remain over the night, his presence not being very particularly required on board the frigate until next day. In the course of the day I told him what Dr. Musgrave had advised, and of the decision I had made to follow it.

“Well,” said he, “if the doctor advises it, I have no doubt it will be best for you; still, it is a thousand pities, for I believe, if you could but hold on a little longer, we should all be able to go home together. I fancy it will not be very long before the frigate herself is ordered home.”

He left next morning, after an early breakfast, promising to return again in a day or two, when, according to arrangement, I was to go back on board with him for a day and renew my acquaintance with my old shipmates.

On the day but one following, he reappeared in almost as excited a state as before.

“Hurrah!” he exclaimed, as he entered the room. “We are ordered to proceed home at once and pay off, so we can all go together. The frigate has had a very successful time of it while she has been out here; ~~we~~ shall go home with our pockets well lined;

and I think I must seize upon the opportunity which the paying-off of the ship will afford, in order to get spliced. I should think Florrie will never have the heart to send me to sea a bachelor again, will she?"

"Upon my word, sir, I don't know," I replied. "Girls are very curious in their notions sometimes, and occasionally require a great deal of persuasion to bring them up to the mark. However, your persuasive powers seemed to be pretty effective with my sister when you last tried them upon her; and, as in duty bound, I will of course do all I can to promote my captain's success."

"Ah, you rogue," rejoined he. "You are fast recovering, I see. There is not much the matter with a midshipman when he is able to fling a sly jest in the face of his captain. But—midshipman? My dear Ralph, you are no longer such. How *could* I be so forgetful? Your commission has come out by the packet which arrived yesterday, and the admiral will hand it you the first time you call upon him. Now let me be the first to congratulate you, which I do most heartily."

We left the house together in the cool of the evening, driving down to the wharf in a ketureen which some friend had been ill-advised enough to lend the skipper, who was no great hand at the ribbons, and who narrowly missed capsizing the concern two or three times during the trip. The gig was waiting for us; and, jumping in, the sails were set, and we flew down the boat-channel with a spanking land breeze under the glorious light of a full moon.

When we reached the ship, I found that my return on board had been made the occasion of a regular jollification; the skipper having invited the whole of the quarter-deck officers to meet me in the cabin at a late dinner and wet my commission.

All the old faces were there, I was glad to see, including even that of Captain Flinn, whose ship, the "*Artemise*," happened to be in port at the time, and little Fisher, who had recovered in a most marvellous manner from his dreadful wounds. There was a great deal of yarn-spinning, some capital singing, and a great deal of wine-drinking, too, on the part of one or two of the guests, notwithstanding which latter drawback we spent a very pleasant evening.

On the following morning I waited upon the admiral and received my commission, the presentation of which he saw fit to accompany with a few complimentary as well as congratulatory remarks; and in the afternoon I drove out to Hurstleigh, as Mr. Finnie had named

his place, for the purpose of packing up my few traps and bidding my kindest of friends farewell. I remained there that night, joining the ship about twelve o'clock next day.

Two days afterwards we sailed from Port Royal, about five o'clock a.m., and after a long but uneventful passage arrived safely home. We anchored at Spithead on the night of our arrival, and next day the ship was taken into harbour and paid off.

When all was done, it was too late for a start for home that night ; so the skipper—who had no relations belonging to him, and therefore intended to visit his dearie before going anywhere else—and I put up at the “George,” starting the first thing after breakfast next morning.

I shall not attempt to describe the joy which our unexpected arrival produced ; suffice it to say that the whole household, not excluding even my reverend father and my revered mother, behaved as though they had suddenly taken leave of their senses ; and it was not until toward evening that anything approaching to calm settled down upon the party.

Then, of course, I had to tell the story of my voyage upon the raft, and of the incidents which followed it ; a mere outline only having been written home by the skipper, the circumstance of my insanity being altogether suppressed ; and then, equally as a matter of course, there were tears and murmured expressions of tender pity and so on, all of which can be a great deal better imagined than described.

Captain Annesley remained with us three days, at the end of which, after a hotly-contested action, Florrie hauled down her colours, and agreed that the wedding should take place on that day month. Then my uncle—or great-uncle rather—Sir Peregrine, came down to see me, our family physician expressing a decided opinion that the noise and bustle of town would be injurious to me, and I had to fight all my battles over again for his benefit.

Then, as soon as they could be got together, an army of dress-makers and milliners was brought into the house, and Sir Peregrine and I were driven by them from room to room, until at length we were driven out of the house altogether ; the building being, almost from basement to roof-tree, crowded with silks, muslins, ribbons, flowers, and every other imaginable species of frippery affected by the gentler sex.

And very soon the wedding presents began to pour in ; the carrier's cart rumbling up to the rectory door daily and discharging parcels and packets, hampers, cases, crates, and goodness knows

what ; so that at length I began to dream at night that the rectory was an Indiaman taking in cargo, and that there was not stowage for it all.

Then Sir Peregrine rushed off to town early one morning, without acquainting anybody with his intention, returning on the day but one following with his pockets crammed full of small parcels, which he conveyed with much secrecy up to his own room.

It was then my turn ; and accordingly away I went in the same unexpected manner—surprises and secrecy appearing to be the order of the day just then,—returning home in due time with *my* humble offering to the blooming bride.

At length the eventful week arrived in which the wedding was to take place ; and from early on the Monday morning—the wedding was fixed for Wednesday—all the young girls of the village seemed to have become possessed with the idea that our garden was public property, and passed in and out, helping themselves with the utmost *sang-froid* to what few early spring flowers there were, and as much greenery as they could carry—no one saying them nay. And I could not help noticing, as a somewhat unusual circumstance, that whenever I passed the noble old church its doors were sure to be open, and somebody passing in or out.

Tuesday evening came, and with it came the impatient bridegroom. The rectory was by that time turned upside-down, inside-out, and goodness knows what else in the shape of confusion ; so that, in sheer desperation, Sir Peregrine and I were at last driven to betake ourselves and poor Annesley—who had almost to be carried off by force, he having had no opportunity for anything more than a hasty word or two with Florrie—to the snug little inn where the skipper was to find quarters that night. My father looked longingly after us, as we retreated through the front door, but, poor man, he was a prisoner with hard labour that night, and there was no escape for him.

By daybreak next morning the whole house was astir, and, oh ! the babel of sound and confusion that reigned therein. I was to act the part of best man, and, as far as I could understand it, my principal duty seemed to be to fix myself to the groom like a sucking-fish, and never allow him to have a moment to himself, or the slightest particle of peace. He was more excited than I had ever before seen him, and between us we made such a flusteration in that otherwise quiet little hostelry as I imagine its inmates will never forget. It was arranged that we should breakfast together and afterwards go in the same carriage—a distance of two or three

cable's lengths at most—to church ; and I have no reason to doubt that we carried out the arrangement ; but neither of us is to this day prepared to swear, from our own recollection, that we did so.

At length, however, we found ourselves somehow walking up the centre aisle of the church, without well knowing how we got there. The grand old fane was transmogrified into something between a forest and a flower-garden, and I then began, for the first time, to surmise where all our shrubs and flowers had betaken themselves ; every pew was closely packed with quiet, well-dressed people ; and the organ was pealing forth some grand old masterpiece which filled the church with melody.

My father, in his robe as D.D., with his curate at hand to assist, stood within the altar-railing in readiness to commence the ceremony ; while—but avast ! what nautical pen can hope to adequately describe a wedding, with its blushing bride, its blooming bridesmaids, its flowers and tears and kisses and congratulations, and all the rest of it ? Suffice it to say that Florrie looked lovely, that Annesley—after his first flusteration was over—never looked more quiet, self-possessed, and handsome than he did that morning ; and that everybody pronounced it to be “ a sweetly pretty wedding ; ” and there you have all I can tell you about it.

The register signed, we weighed in succession, and all trundled home to the rectory, Annesley with his prize leading the van. And then there was, of course, the breakfast—of which I, for one, ate very little—and the speechifying afterwards, and what not ; and then the happy couple retired for a time, appearing again in travelling attire ; then there was the half-laughing, half-tearful “ good-bye,” the descent of all hands in a body to the door, where Annesley's handsome travelling-carriage and four stood in readiness ; then more good-byes ; and finally the departure, in the midst of a perfect storm of cheers and old shoes—all in regular order. After which the guests seemed to feel more at ease, and we ended all by having a regular jollification.

The next few days were devoted to a general clearing up of the wreck and getting things back into their proper places again, after which the house settled down once more into its wonted peace and quietness, pretty much as though—except for the absence of one fair face from the family table—such things as weddings were unknown.

And now, dear reader, my tale is told—my yarn is spun ; and I have finished off in the orthodox form with a wedding, which seems to

be the inevitable and only correct way in which a story can be brought to a symmetrical conclusion. Nothing remains but to say Farewell, which, believe me, I do with reluctance, sincerely hoping that an opportunity may yet occur for us to renew our acquaintance.
FAREWELL.

THE END.